PLAYBOY

Je t'aime, Jane

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84

KID CUDI WEARS LGN Louis Gabriel Nouchi coat. K.ngsley shirt. ROUGH. pants. Christian Louboutin boots.

PHOTOGRAPH BY **MASON POOLE**

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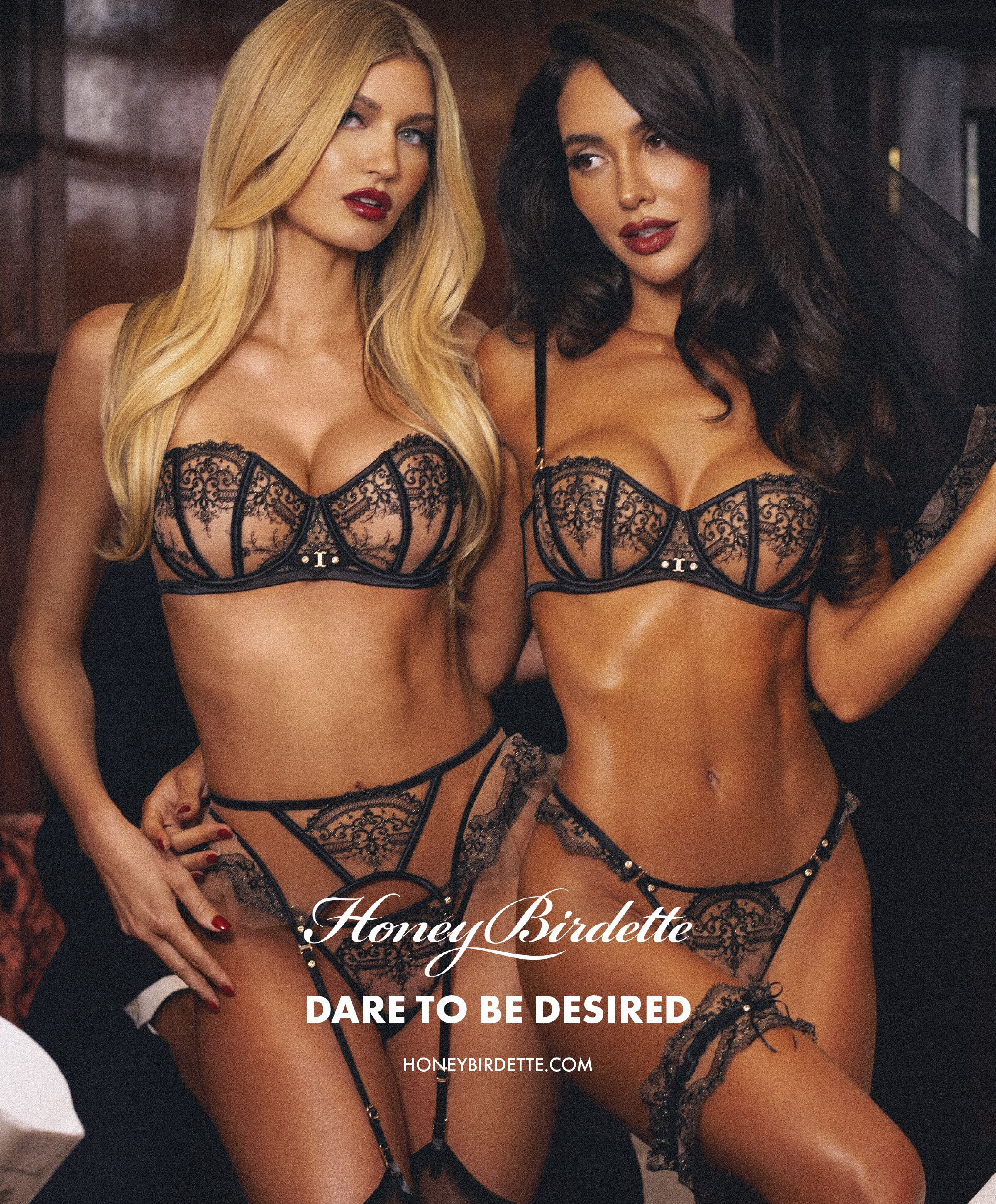
POSTMASTER: Send address changes to MaryAnne Tongko at 10960 Wilshire Blvd., Suite 2200, Los Angeles, CA 90024.



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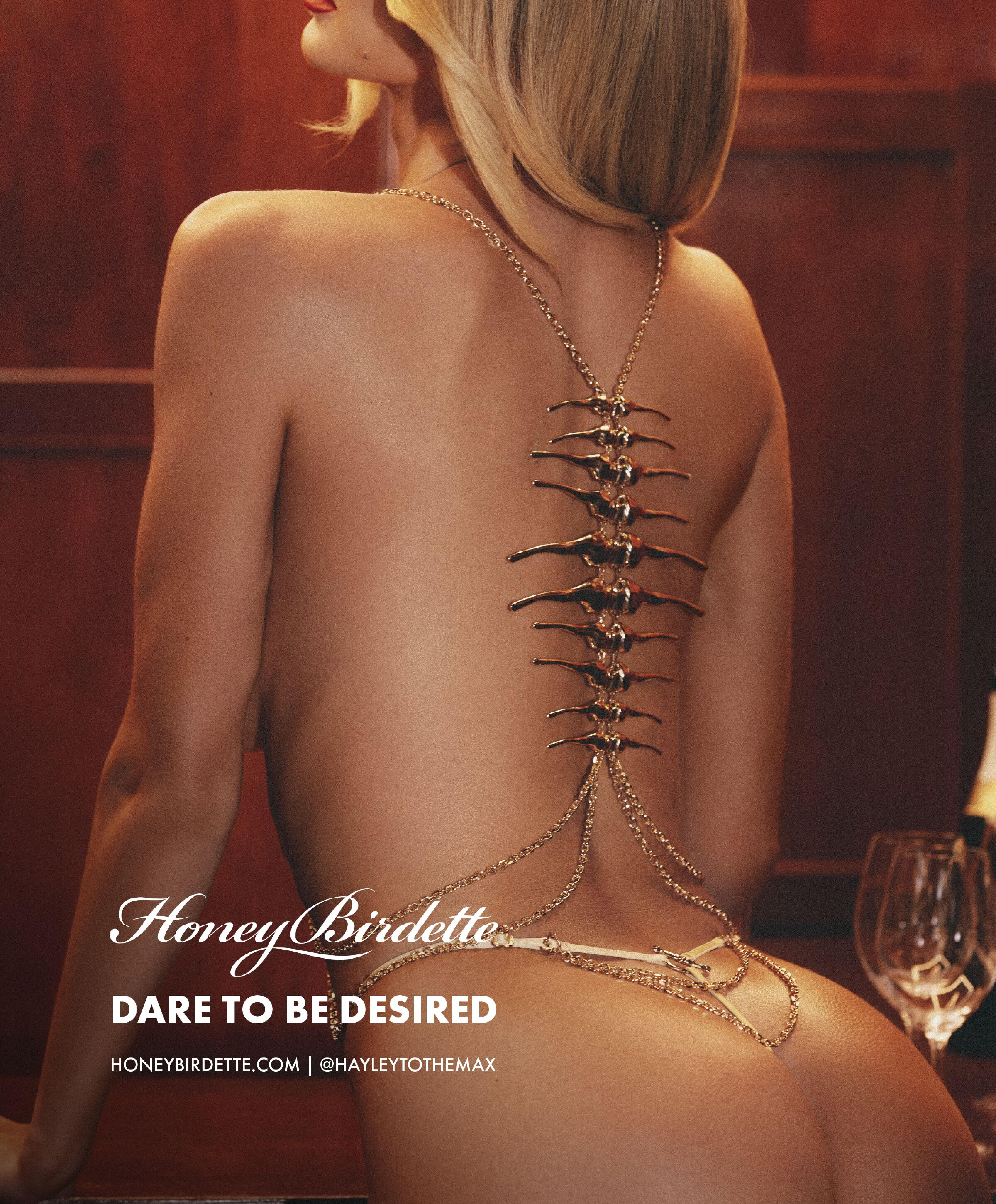
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JOSEFINA SANTOS is a Colombian photographer and director based in Brooklyn. Her work blends portraiture, fashion, and documentary into a visual language that feels expressive, intimate, and deeply human. At the heart of her practice is connection: She builds collaborative spaces where subjects feel seen, resulting in imagery that honors identity and emotion with authenticity. "Thank You, India," Santos's pictorial of painter India Sachi, begins on page 202.

JAYSON BUFORD

JAYSON BUFORD is a New York–born writer whose work has appeared in *Rolling Stone*, *GQ*, *Billboard*, and *Highsnobiety*. A lifelong Knicks fan with a sharp eye for culture and character, he weaves sports, music, and storytelling with a distinct point of view. On page 84, Buford sits down with alt hip-hop legend Kid Cudi to discuss his evolution from shadow-dancing outsider to genre-defining star for the *Playboy* Interview.

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MASON POOLE

MASON POOLE has, in recent years, photographed some of the biggest names in entertainment—Beyoncé, Lady Gaga, Billie Eilish—finding ways to make the most familiar faces feel newly intimate. The Los Angeles–based photographer's magic, in part, comes from a grounding in reportage, where the goal is to search for honesty. For this issue, he photographs Kid Cudi for the *Playboy* Interview.

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TOP RIGHT: PHOTOGRAPH BY **SHANA JADE** (COURTESY OF *BYLINE*)

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The Last

Great driver's cars under six figures are going extinct. Get in while you still can. **By Lawrence Ulrich**

DRIVE THROUGH any American parking lot and witness the automotive apocalypse: a beige sea of SUVs punctuated by oversize pickups. Performance cars have become unicorns in a world that's forgotten how to have fun. The numbers tell a brutal story. Americans bought 420,000 enthusiast cars (coupes, convertibles, sports cars) at the millennium's turn. Last year? Just 180,000. That's one in 90 new cars, heading toward 150,000 this year. Convertibles are nearly extinct: one in 250 cars, or 0.4 percent of the market.

Entire species have vanished. The Camaro, Dodge Challenger, Audi TT, Jaguar F-Type, and Subaru WRX STI—all canceled. Even the mighty Mustang sold just 44,000 units last year, its worst performance in 60 years. Adding insult, Ford's electric Mustang Mach-E SUV easily outsold the real thing. What's left costs stupid money. A Porsche 911 starts around $120,000, assuming you can find one under $150,000. Digital complexity has neutered the survivors, turning even small cars into rolling NSA bunkers stuffed with screens and nannies.

The good news: Five road-burners still exist under $100,000, including one used gem that's worth every penny. These are for grown-ups who've outgrown Miatas, aren't into Corvettes, and aren't ready for soulless EVs. When electric cars rule the world, these machines will seem like fossil-fueled dinosaurs. They'll also inspire Spielbergian reveries over everything we've lost. Get in while you still can.

Acura Integra Type S

Front-drive performance cars usually suck: too soft for tracks, too wound up for streets, too cramped for adults. The Integra Type S brilliantly avoids every trap. Take a Honda Civic Type R, add $7,000 in refinement, and you get automotive perfection. The 320-hp turbo four sounds modest until you hustle it through canyons, where modest numbers dissolve into pure endorphins. The six-speed manual is a precision instrument, while adjustable suspension settings reveal Porsche-level chassis sophistication in a package that won't bankrupt you. ***$51,995***

BMW Z4 M40i Handschalter

Exhibit A, or Z, that some Americans

Fun Cars

still crave old-school fun. Z4 sales soared the instant BMW offered a manual. Credit the Handschalter package, a $3,500 six-speed that amplifies everything about this underrated roadster. The stubby shifter whips 382 horses from BMW's twin-turbo inline-six. With proper clutch work, 0 to 60 takes 3.9 seconds. Retuned steering and adaptive suspension make it newly frisky in corners. Yet its open-air come-on and sumptuous cabin can still lure partners for weekends. ***$71,125***

Mercedes-AMG GT (2016–21)
With new sports car prices inflating exponentially, go used for near-supercar style. The first-gen AMG GT, with its stars-and-bars nose and bombastic rear fenders, recalled a Viper by way of Germany. AMG's hand-built 4.0-liter twin-turbo V-8 sends 456 to 577 horsepower rearward. More than just thundering power, it delivered revelatory handling with enough joy to make Beethoven grin. ***Used, from $70,000***

Porsche 718 Boxster and Cayman
Porsche plans to electrify these analog legends, so this is your farewell tour. The original Boxster launched Porsche's mid-engine renaissance in 1996. Today's turbocharged 718 (pictured) carries that torch with even sharper reflexes. The Cayman coupe established itself as the handling yardstick for affordable two-seaters over its 20-year run. After three years of testing, Porsche still reportedly struggles with its electric replacement. Even its engineers know it's hard to improve on a legend. ***$74,795 (Cayman); $76,895 (Boxster)***

Cadillac CT5-V Blackwing
A "stealth" sedan used to mean your dad's silver Audi. Today it describes the most self-effacing assassin in auto history: a Cadillac with 668 supercharged horsepower, standard six-speed manual, and the urge to humiliate any BMW, Bentley, or Mercedes. Street or track, it corners with all-day poise and departs with unstoppable force: 3.5 seconds to 60 with an optional automatic. ***$99,190***

PHOTOGRAPH: COURTESY OF PORSCHE

20 QUESTIONS

SEBASTIAN MANISCALCO

THE STAND-UP LEGEND IS SELLING OUT STADIUMS. BUT HE STILL CAN'T STAND YOUR INVISALIGN. **BY LAUREN LARSON**

Q1: You have said you like being bothered. What kind of situation activates you, comedically?

MANISCALCO: I guess it's just a general annoyance with human behavior and what happens on a day-to-day, whether it's someone not bringing over a bottle of wine when we have a party—whatever. For example, someone brought over dessert. It was a cake, and then at the end of the party, they took the cake home. I was like, "If you bring something over to somebody's house, isn't that supposed to stay here?" So it's just like little annoyances that people are not even aware of. I tend to kind of take that little morsel or seed of something that happened and then bring it to the stage and make it comedic. I liken it to an allergy. If you're allergic to peanuts and you're around them, it's just going to flare you up. I'm just allergic to behavior, I guess.

Q2: What's the most insignificant thing that annoys you?

MANISCALCO: Right now it's people who wear their Invisaligns in public. I look at their mouths, and I see bubbles of saliva caught between the Invisalign and the teeth. Someone had them on when they were talking to me, and I couldn't not look at their mouth the whole time. It's just a distraction. I have Invisalign, and I use it when I sleep. I'm not gonna be walking around the grocery store wearing my Invisalign.

Q3: Are you also disturbed by people chewing?

MANISCALCO: Yeah. My wife is an audible chewer, which is something that we've had to deal with in our relationship. However, I'm an audible gum chewer. I smack on my gum, and my wife often tells me, "Hey, that's disgusting." And I'll take the gum out and throw it out the window of the car, because I know. I have this thing; I have not been diagnosed with it, but it's called misophonia. If somebody pops open a can of Coke on an airplane, it runs down my back, you know? Or if somebody's eating chips on an airplane. It could be anything. It's just like the most minor thing. I will home in on it, and I cannot get it out of my head. But I think it has aided me with coming up with comedic bits because I'm so easily annoyed with the little things in life.

> "I LIKEN IT TO AN ALLERGY. IF YOU'RE ALLERGIC TO PEANUTS AND YOU'RE AROUND THEM, IT FLARES YOU UP. I'M JUST ALLERGIC TO BEHAVIOR, I GUESS."

Q4: Have there been times when nothing has happened to piss you off and you've felt fallow in your comedy?

MANISCALCO: There have been droughts. It's not necessarily that my radar is off, and I'm not walking around completely disgusted all day long. It's just that there have been moments in my career when there's nothing I find particularly funny or feel like it could be a good comedic bit. Those times will pass, and then there's a flood of stuff coming in.

Q5: How do you pull yourself out of that kind of rut?

MANISCALCO: I've often leaned on exercise to kind of reset myself if I don't feel right or if I'm feeling a little down or depressed. Getting on a treadmill and running for 15 to 20 minutes, whatever that does kind of snaps me out of whatever I'm dealing with. But as far as getting out of a rut—not being able to come up with comedy—it's something I think I just have to go through and come out of it naturally.

Q6: Were you still able to find material during the pandemic?

MANISCALCO: The pandemic was awful for me. I need to get up onstage and perform, not only for what I do as a career but it's like a form of therapy for me to go out and share my inner thoughts with a group of strangers onstage. It just does something for my mood. I was pinned in the house; I couldn't do anything. I'd been working since I was 14 years old, and then all of a sudden, I had two years off. It was like, I have so much momentum going with my career that is going to be stifled now. It was an awful time for me. And I have to get up onstage pretty much every week to flesh out my inner thoughts, because there's actually no writing involved when I'm coming up with my bits; it's worked out onstage. I'm not really a joke writer. I'm more of a storyteller.

Q7: Yeah, you're very clear when you tell stories. In *Stay Hungry*, when you're talking about the heavy-footed man on the treadmill next to you at

PHOTOGRAPH BY **PEGGY SIROTA**

the gym, I can picture it. Whom did you learn storytelling from?

MANISCALCO: I just always, as a child, loved telling stories to my family around the kitchen table about what happened at school. Even when I got up to do a book report, I was very conscious of making the kids laugh, because I had sat through—God, you know—10 or 12 book reports, and I was bored out of my mind. I just always thought there should be an element of entertainment if you get in front of people and start talking. I always kind of took pride in the fact that I could paint a picture for the audience and they could actually see what I was talking about, because when I'm doing stand-up, I'm visualizing me at the gym, looking at the guy on the treadmill.

Q8: What was your proudest moment as a child comedian?

MANISCALCO: I dressed as Stevie Wonder for a book report. We were doing autobiography book reports, so I came in with the sunglasses and the hat. This was when Eddie Murphy was impersonating Stevie Wonder on *Saturday Night Live*, and I did the whole book report as Stevie Wonder. People enjoyed it, and I knew at a young age I was going to be a comedian. In second grade, I told my teacher that's what I wanted to do, because I was watching *The Tonight Show* with my father late at night and watching all those comedians. I was fascinated by it. At 15, I was going to comedy clubs—not to perform, just to be there to watch. I had a fake ID back then, and my girlfriend at the time would come. Everybody else was going to the Friday night football game. And I'm sitting in the back of the comedy club in Rosemont, Illinois.

Q9: Now there are so many avenues beyond clubs for comedians to find an audience. There are Netflix and Hulu specials *[Maniscalco will debut an hour-long special on Hulu in November]*, podcasting, and social media. What's good about that, and what's bad about that?

MANISCALCO: There are pros and cons. I think for me, speaking from a comedian's point of view, it's great to have all these outlets. Twenty-five years ago, you had to get a spot, maybe on a late-night talk show, and then maybe you got some traction. And everybody was watching network TV, and if you got a TV show, there was a good chance you'd get some eyeballs on it because there were only three or four stations. But with the invention of social media and all these streamers, comedians have a lot of opportunities to get eyeballs not only domestically but internationally. There was a point when you were popular in the United States, but nobody knew who you were in Australia. But with YouTube now, you have wide, wide reach, and you can tour in those areas; I'm going to Saudi Arabia in October. But the—I don't know if you want to say a con—but for me, someone who's been doing stand-up comedy for 27 years, for people to either call themselves a comedian or kind of put themselves in the same category as comedians… It's like everybody's a comedian nowadays. I look at it as a really cool group of people to be a part of, who really put in the time and the energy to craft their material and really work at it. Then there are people who just all of a sudden got a podcast, and now they are comedians. There's just a lot of shit in the bag, you know what I'm saying?

Q10: You have a podcast with Pete Correale [*The Pete and Sebastian Show*], and that's such a different exercise from being onstage. What does podcasting do for you?

MANISCALCO: The podcast I do with Pete is generally a kind of recap of our week, our personal or professional lives, and kind of what we're going through. It gives us an opportunity to do more long-form storytelling. Comedy onstage tends to mean keeping people laughing, but with the podcast, we can kind of breathe with the story and be a little bit more detailed. We've been doing it for 12 or 13 years now. It's not something that is guest-driven; it's just been a passion project for Pete and me. It's not necessarily making a ton of money. We really just enjoy talking to one another. And I find Pete really, really entertaining.

Q11: Which other comedians do you admire?

MANISCALCO: To be honest, I don't watch a lot of stand-up comedy. When you're in it, I don't know if you really want to be watching it. But, I mean, Shane Gillis is a guy who seems to be doing really well, and I think he's talented, especially given what he had to go through—getting canceled and coming back. But I don't look at a lot of stand-up for my entertainment. I watch a lot of documentaries or action films—kind of the opposite of what I do for a living. And I find a lot of humor in drama. I'll be watching a drama, and my wife will say, "What are you laughing at?"

Q12: What are you thinking specifically when you say that?

MANISCALCO: There's a movie called *Ransom* with Mel Gibson in which somebody kidnaps his kids and he's looking for them. And there's a scene in the movie in which a guy just turns around and quickly hits this guy in the throat with his hand. I want to say it is Gary Sinise. And I started dying laughing based on the reaction of the guy who got hit.

Q13: That aligns with some of the over-the-top moments of physicality in your comedy, like I could see you connecting with an over-the-top reaction to getting hit in the throat. To what extent do you practice your physicality before you get onstage?

MANISCALCO: It's not like I'm practicing the movement in a mirror in my bathroom. It kind of comes out during storytelling. When you're telling a story to somebody, and if you're using your hands to tell the story, you're not really thinking about "Oh, I'm going to move my hand to the left here." It's just kind of organic movement that happens onstage.

Q14: You have a very specific character onstage. Have there been times when you've wanted to get away from that?

MANISCALCO: I mean the delivery, the cadence, the movement, and the physicality are all part of what I do up there. It's not like I'm gonna all of a sudden stop and stand behind the microphone and be a monotone type of comedian. But the last special I did was, I felt, kind of a departure from what I normally do for a couple of reasons. Number one, I wasn't as physical—or couldn't be as physical as I wanted to be—because I was dealing with sciatic pain ripping down my right leg. It's kind of hard to be funny when you're hurting, so that hampered me. And I also performed in a tuxedo. We did it in Las Vegas, and the whole theme behind it was I'm gonna bring Vegas back to the '60s when people still dressed up. So I asked the audience to come dressed in tuxedos and cocktail dresses; only about 20 percent did. The tuxedo hampered my movement, and I felt like I was a little too restricted with a bow tie on. So with this special coming on Hulu, I don't have the sciatica anymore, thank God, and I got back to my roots of not only telling the story but acting it out.

Q15: You'll be performing in a leotard for optimal mobility?

MANISCALCO: I went back to my jacket and black jeans. I've always performed in a jacket. I started wearing them not because of the style; I have a thing called hyperhidrosis

PHOTOGRAPH BY DANNY CLINCH

that causes me to sweat excessively, and I used to put a jacket on to kind of hide the sweat stains on my shirt or what have you. And then I really enjoyed the look of it.

Q16: I've heard that people can even get Botox injections for hyperhidrosis. Have you ever done that yourself?

MANISCALCO: Yeah, I did that. I don't do it anymore because I don't seem to have that issue so much. I think it's spawned by anxiety. Before I went onstage, the sweat ring would be down to my hips.

Q17: Is it really true that when you get Botox for sweat in one place, it sometimes comes out more profusely from other parts?

MANISCALCO: Yeah, I actually had a joke on that. It rerouted itself, and it was coming out of my kneecaps. It has to come out somewhere.

Q18: Sorry I took it there for a moment. Let's get back on track now. How do you usually go about recharging your voice after each show?

MANISCALCO: In the last three years, I started to see a little fatigue in my vocal cords that I didn't really notice when I was younger. I try to minimize speaking the day of the show. I don't get on the phone or talk to a lot of people. And drinking tea, which I never used to drink before, soothes my throat. I like to have a couple of Halls Mentho-Lyptus before I go onstage. I don't know if it does anything scientifically, but it makes me feel like my throat is a little more opened up.

Q19: You have a very Italian presence. I feel like in the last 5 or 10 years, Italian family life and culture has been played for laughs quite often. How do you personally feel about that?

MANISCALCO: I wouldn't call what I do making fun of the Italian community. I focus more on the absurdity and ridiculousness of my father and what he is doing on a day-to-day basis. And I think a lot of Italians relate to that type of behavior. I also got people coming up to me saying, "Oh, it's the same thing in the Colombian family" or "My Argentinian father is the same as your father." I think there is a shared experience there that people kind of tapped into.

Q20: When you are making a joke that involves your family and your private life, what are the lines you feel you won't cross?

MANISCALCO: I grew up in a very private family. It was often told to us at home, "Never repeat anything that you hear in this house outside." Never tell anybody how much money you make. Don't talk about religion or politics or any of that. You grow up with a sense of what's appropriate and what's not appropriate. I know my dad like the back of my hand. But there was one joke where I had to check in with my mother-in-law. My mother-in-law's husband had passed away, and prior to him passing away, they had bought two plots at the cemetery. She had since remarried, and I did a joke like "Are you going to get buried next to your husband who passed away or your new husband?" I just felt like it was a little sensitive to be talking about death and whatnot. So I checked in with her. She loved it.

HELI-SKIING FOR THE REST OF US

Hitting the air was once reserved for multimillionaires and helmet cam heroes. But with resorts increasingly clogged and chaotic, a new wave of guided trips is making it easier and more appealing for everyday skiers to get in the chopper. **By Will Cockrell**

NEARLY 62 MILLION SKIERS hit U.S. resorts last season, a near record. Social feeds told the story: endless lift lines, jammed base lodges, powder gone by noon. This year looks no different.

Heli-skiing offers the opposite: no crowds, untouched snow, and no one fighting you for the last line down. The only real skill required is to know how to ski powder (keep those tips up).

Operators across the Lower 48 and Alaska have finally gotten the memo. Most of us aren't looking to drop into a couloir or debate slope angles over lunch. Instead of selling terrain straight out of a Red Bull ad, more resorts are marketing what they really offer: the greatest day of skiing in your life, whatever your ability.

"It must be the magazines and ski movies. When people think of heli-skiing, they think extreme," says veteran guide Jamie Weeks. "Sure, a helicopter lets you access steep, gnarly terrain. But even in Alaska, there are hundreds of thousands of acres of mellow cruiser runs."

The real thrill often has little to do with expertise. Buzzing jagged peaks in a chopper, digging through avalanche drills, standing on a sweeping ridgeline that looks like the set of a Warren Miller film… It's all part of the fantasy. The skiing itself often involves more fun than fear. "What I love most is when a less experienced client says they skied the greatest run of their life on day one," says Weeks. "Because they get better every day."

Operators have also gotten savvier about mixed-ability groups. Days are built around terrain that won't psych anyone out. Guides coax confidence rather than crush egos. Showboats are gently nudged away from turning every run into Instagram theater.

Pricing, once as intimidating as the terrain, has also mellowed. Entry level trips now start at around $1,500 a day. Eagle Pass Heli, near Revelstoke in British Columbia, runs small-group trips (four skiers per heli) at similar rates. More laps, less waiting. Powderbird, at Snowbird in Utah, and Chugach Powder Guides, at Alyeska in Alaska, even let you tag a day of heli onto a standard resort vacation with no weeklong commitment required.

The farther north you go, the shorter the leap to wilderness. In British Columbia, CMH Heli-Skiing offers one-day trips out of Purcell. Think Alpine glaciers and untracked bowls roughly between Spokane, Washington, and Calgary, with prices softened by the Canadian dollar. Alaska still holds the gold standard, even for its easiest terrain.

And, yes, the multimillionaire version still very much exists. It just got more inclusive. High-end Alaska lodges, like Tordrillo and those in Valdez, now cater to mixed groups: families, couples, intermediate skiers chasing the dream. These weeklong, remote lodge experiences run from $8,000 to $10,000 per person. They sell out precisely because both the terrain difficulty and pace are fully customizable.

Insider tip: Book in fours. Most helis seat a pilot, two guides, and four clients. If you fill those seats, you effectively own the bird. Which means it's your call: You can set the dial from mellow to mayhem.

PHOTOGRAPHS: BRANDON COLE, TORDRILLO MOUNTAIN LODGE.

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TAKE A HIKE WITH MISS JANUARY **JORDYN JOHNSON**, THE PRIVATE CHEF WHO ALWAYS HAS A NEW ADVENTURE COOKING.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY **ARNIE WATKINS**

If there's a kitchen nearby, Jordyn is in it. The 26-year-old Arizona native can't help herself. There, in the room she feels most at home, she's making snacks all day, turning simple ingredients into expressions of love. "Very nonna of me," she says with a laugh, describing her need to feed people. Whether it's banana bread on a bad day or cinnamon rolls on a good one, she gravitates toward everything sweet, spicy, and carb-loaded without discrimination.

This culinary compulsion is ingrained in a woman who can trace her roots back to Sicily. Both parents taught her that the kitchen was the heart of everything, and she carries forward family recipes from aunts with full cookbooks and a grandfather who published his own. The most satisfying moments in her dual career as model and private chef come when someone takes a bite of her food and declares it the best thing they've ever tasted. Recently, she and her older sister made lasagna completely from scratch—pasta included—using elk that her sister had hunted herself.

When the intensity of Los Angeles modeling life overwhelms her, Jordyn decamps to the mountains that shaped her childhood in Paradise Valley. These peaks provide the reset button her soul seeks, preferably with her sister, Gina, and Gina's golden retriever, Kaito, in tow. ("That's my niece," she jokes.) The siblings love to fish together—continuing a tradition from grandparents who were master fishermen—whether that's deep-sea excursions or trout fishing in Colorado's Crested Butte, a destination they visit five or six times yearly.

The sisters represent opposite sides of the same coin: Gina studies biology and spends every weekend in the mountains, while Jordyn pursues creative modeling work in the city. Yet they connect over a shared love of the outdoors, a setting that grounds them both.

Her favorite compliment is being told she's intelligent and understanding. "Everyone wants to feel understood," she explains. This wisdom extends to her famously direct advice-giving, which ranges from thoughtful counsel to the delightfully "unhinged recommendation to leave your boyfriend, dump him, never speak to him again, and let's leave the country."

That particular guidance has been followed multiple times, leading to therapeutic paradisiac escapes. "You need a tropical location to marinate in the sun and drink rum punch all day," she says and cites post-breakup trips to Jamaica and the Galápagos Islands as particularly effective healing destinations.

Balance remains her ongoing challenge. She can sleep 12 hours straight and thrives on modeling's unpredictable schedule, but she's seeking more structure and meaning in daily moments rather than waiting for one big breakthrough. Her morning espresso ritual sets the tone. "If I get a burnt espresso, that pisses me off," she says, smiling. "Good coffee and seeing the sun launches my day." —SEAN EVANS

CAMEL
GT

What drew you to the *Playboy* world?

Well, I feel like there's so many models that I look up to, and they've all shot in *Playboy*. So it was really awesome when I got the opportunity. I was so excited.

What's a scent that turns you on instantly?

This one's going to be weird, but definitely armpits. Or cigar smell. I don't want to say that turns me on, but cigars and armpits.

What would we learn about you by going through your trash?

If someone went through my trash, they would probably think, "Wow, this girl eats for a family of four."

What part of your personality is your biggest turn-on? What do you like most about your personality?

I think what I like most about my personality is that nothing ever really makes me that mad. I just let go of things and move on.

What's something you've never told your parents but would tell us right now?

Mom, I'm doing *Playboy* right now.

If you could text your younger self one sentence, what would it say?

Ooh, if I could text my younger self one sentence, I would say, "The world is your oyster. Do whatever you want all the time."

What's the most intimate thing someone could do for you that doesn't involve touching?

I think that when someone understands the little things that you like and they could surprise you with those little things and do them for you, that's pretty intimate, because most men don't do that.

What part of yourself were you hoping people would see when you became a Playmate?

That I'm actually fun and that I leave the house to do fun stuff.

What are you most passionate about?

I'm just really passionate about loving all my family and friends at all times and making sure everyone's good at all times, making sure everyone's fed and everyone's happy.

STYLING BY **RIMA VAIDILA**. MAKEUP BY **HEATHER HARRIS**. HAIR BY **ANASTASIIA TEREBOVA**.

HOW INCELS HAPPENED

Social scientists are starting to study the most broken men online. Fixing them is another question. **BY EAMON WHALEN**

WHO GOES INCEL? William Costello has as good an idea as anyone. An evolutionary psychologist at the University of Texas at Austin, Costello has become one of the world's foremost experts on incels—short for *involuntary celibates*, a term that now describes a male group identity forged online, built upon a sense of victimization over their lack of sex and a grievance toward women, whom they blame for their condition.

Alongside a small but growing cohort of researchers, Costello is on the bleeding edge of what we might call the new science of lost boys. Incel studies is a nascent field that seeks to understand a subculture of men best known for vicious misogyny, online harassment, nihilistic memes, and spree killings as a complicated, vulnerable population experiencing "real social pain," who are worthy of sober and dispassionate study.

Last year, Costello was part of a team that conducted the largest academic survey of self-identified incels to date, based on a sample of more than 500 men in the United States and the United Kingdom. The study was commissioned by the U.K. government, and Costello and his coauthors went on to present their findings at the House of Commons.

From his survey, Costello knows that an incel tends to be a straight man. Tends to be childless. Tends to be in his 20s. Average height. He knows that incels are more racially diverse than you might think: Almost half the incels in the survey, who were recruited online and presented with a detailed questionnaire, were not white. He knows some disconcerting numbers too. Like that 30 percent of the incels in the study met the criteria for an autism screening. Or that half still live with their parents, which might be related to the fact that half do not have a full-time job. Or that nearly 20 percent of them simply have nothing going for them: no job, no degree, and definitely no girlfriend. Social scientists call this NEET: Not in Education, Employment, or Training. Incels call it LDAR: Lay Down and Rot.

The study also found markedly high levels of depression, anxiety, and loneliness. One in five of the incels surveyed had considered killing himself every day for the previous two weeks.

Costello divides incels into two personality types. The first is Psychosocial Vulnerability Trajectory. This is a guy with a high likelihood of autism and a history of being bullied. The second is Dispositional Extremism. This is a guy who is, for lack of a better word, an entitled asshole with latent or active right-wing politics. He is the incel of the public imagination, the troll incarnate, gaming, gooning, tinkering in the basement on new ways to terrorize women on the internet.

While he notes there is overlap between the two, in Costello's view, the distinction is crucial. "Depending on which incel you meet, you could come away with a sense of 'Oh my God. These guys are really suffering. They're going through a lot, and genuinely they deserve help.' Whereas the other side, they're just so aggressive and hostile that it's hard to have any sympathy for them."

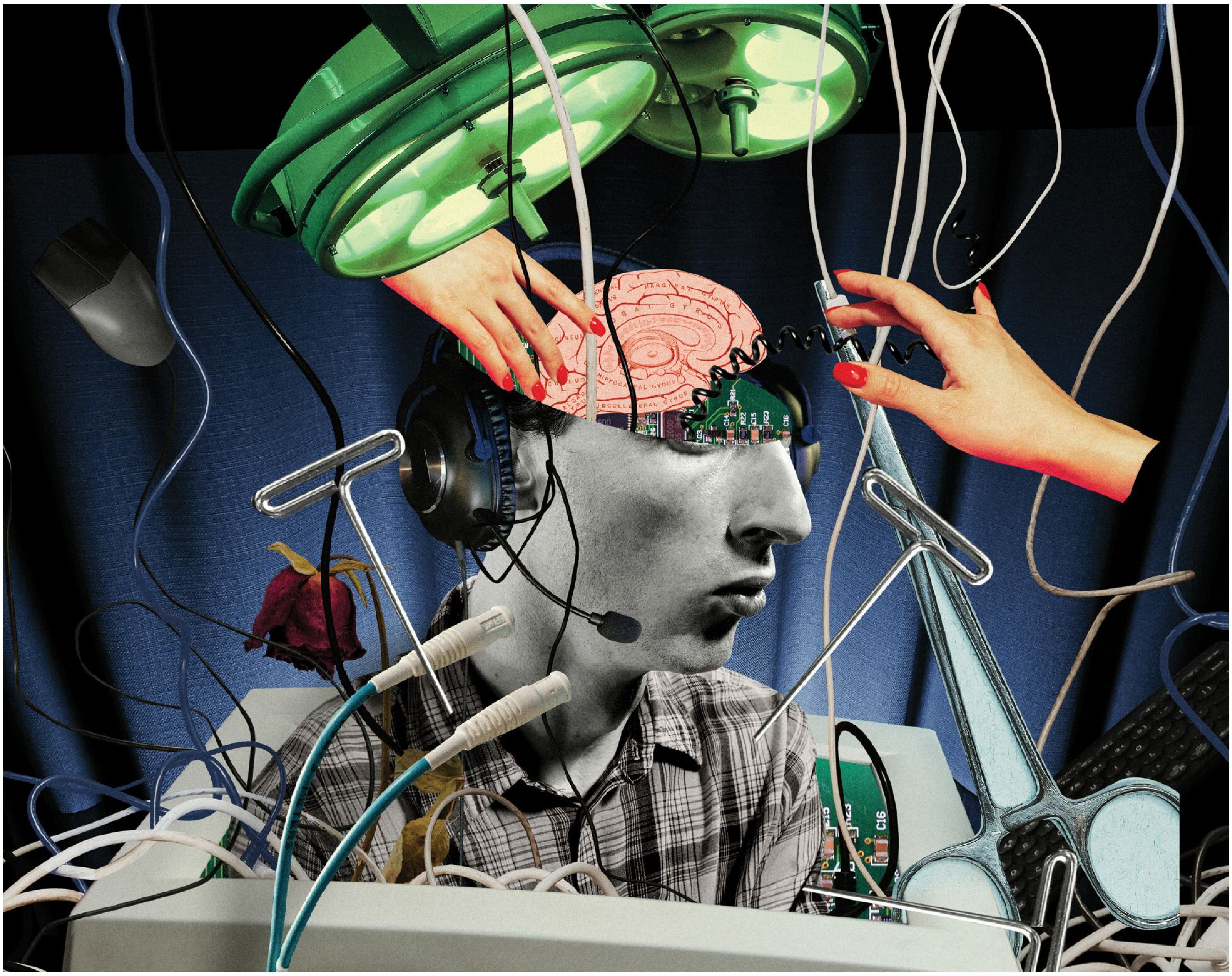
Costello values primary research because most studies rely on forum posts—often misogynistic and racist, but research has shown that the majority of the content one sees on those forums is produced by a small percentage of the participants. "That's not to say that there isn't tacit agreement among the lurkers, but you're basically judging the whole community by the extreme words of the most extreme minority, and that's not really that useful," Costello says.

One may be tempted to say that incels are total fucking losers. Incels would agree. Over the course of the last 50 years, women have been empowered to decide what they want their lives to be, including whom they want to date, sleep with, live with, and marry. This freedom, some incels argue, has turned dating into a ruthless competitive marketplace determined solely by the hierarchy of appearance. The so-called Chads are on top. The incels are at the bottom. By dint of genetic misfortune, whether it's their height or their jawline, incels believe they face a life sentence of sexlessness. In the taxonomy of the manosphere, their fatalism separates them from Andrew Tate red-pill types. Incels say, "We give up." Their pill is black.

Here is where Costello seeks to intervene. He is committed to "wrestling evolutionary psychology away from the manosphere." He points to the "Scientific Black Pill" page on an incel website, chock-full of misappropriated academic studies, mostly from his discipline, that assure incels there is no hope. Their unfuckability is unfalsifiable. "There is nothing they'll accept as disproving of their worldview," Costello says.

Central to that worldview is the 80/20 rule of "female hypergamy," a folk theory that's practically the iron law of inceldom. In their view, it is a biological fact that 80 percent of women want to sleep and partner up with just 20 percent of men. That means that even if you get a girlfriend, she'll leave you for the first guy hotter than you who shows interest. This supersize version of male insecurity leads to a sense of nihilism, which surely contributes to what Costello calls "performative antagonism"—what anyone else would call trolling.

While there is real value in drawing out a fuller portrait of what an incel is, whether Costello and some of his colleagues in incel studies have the right answers to the larger question underpinning their work—what do we do about these lost boys and the world



that made them?—is another matter altogether. There is also the ever-present risk of appearing too sympathetic or soft-pedaling abhorrent ideas. "I never want to be seen as a mouthpiece for the incel movement, and I don't think I am," Costello says. "I try to just let the data do the speaking and make sense of the data as evenhanded as I can."

To that end, Costello maintains that the threat of incel violence is overstated and that the fears of such violence, like those leading up to the 2019 premiere of *The Joker*, have the trappings of a moral panic. But in the age of the mass shooter, it's hard to know what is a credible threat and what is "for the lulz." The most infamous incel, after all, was Elliot Rodger, who killed six people in one night in Isla Vista, California, in 2014, an act of retribution for a lifetime of romantic rejection.

Men lashing out after they are unable to have the kinds of romantic and sexual relationships they desire is nothing new. Part of what makes incels so thoroughly of this moment is the internet. It is online where they have found each other, shared Wojak memes, and fashioned their misery into a collective identity as victims mourning the end of the era when women had no choice but to settle with guys like them.

Costello argues somewhat provocatively that there are positives to this identity that often go unnoticed. Inceldom provides fraternity, a common enemy, shared language and symbols, and a powerful story that explains to a vulnerable population why they are the way they are. But one can hardly call these positives if they turn a harmless loser into a hardened sexist.

"If you're the lonely guy in the basement, then it's a bit of fun compared to the anxiety of self-development and going through the hard work," Costello says. "But if your goal is to get them to reengage with reality and to reengage with society?" On that question, the literature is clear. "It's really important that incels get offline and cultivate real-world friendship groups, because that's the way most people actually form relationships," he says.

The evolution of *incel* as a descriptor into an identity with an accompanying ideology presents a vexing question for researchers like Costello. What would need to change for an incel to no longer be an incel? "They all talk about it like they could relapse; they say, 'I could always go back to being an incel,'" Costello says. "That makes it fundamentally a mindset problem." Overcoming that mindset is easier said than done when the fraternal institutions and social scaffolding available to yesterday's men have been crushed, but it could start with a simple mantra: Log off.

IMAGES: COURTESY OF **FSTOP IMAGES-CARL SMITH/BRAND X PICTURES VIA GETTY IMAGES** (MAN); **COLORS HUNTER-CHASSEUR DE COULEURS/MOMENT VIA GETTY IMAGES** (CURTAIN); **MIKROMAN6/MOMENT VIA GETTY IMAGES** (BRAIN); **ISTOCK.COM/MASTER1305** (HANDS); **ISTOCK.COM/GEMENACOM** (CABLE); **ISTOCK.COM/PRADIT_PH** (FLOWER).

ILLUSTRATION BY **MOLLY DICKSON**

THE BRO HORMONE BOOM

PART MEDICAL MIRACLE, PART MASCULINITY GRIFT: WHY TESTOSTERONE IS SUDDENLY EVERYONE'S FAVORITE DRUG.

BY WILL COCKRELL

WITH THE CREDENTIALS of a clinician and the pitch of a start-up founder, Cameron Sepah, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist, has become the new face of pharmaceutical masculinity. As founder of Maximus, a telehealth platform that promises to "maximize masculinity," he's built a for-profit business on the American male's most common insecurities.

Sepah calls himself a "serial health tech entrepreneur" and insists his business model is no contradiction. "I don't think doing good and doing well financially are mutually exclusive," he says. By "good," Sepah is referring to what disciples claim is a boost in energy, libido, and even mood from testosterone replacement therapy (TRT).

But TRT still makes some physicians uneasy, not because the treatment lacks evidence but rather because it's often marketed like a gym membership. "It's not as dichotomous as we once thought," says Dr. Jesse Mills, a urologist and the director of the Men's Clinic at UCLA and the author of *A Field Guide to Men's Health*. "If you exceed the upper limit of normal, does that mean you're going to die? Of course not," he says, referring to patients whose testosterone levels land slightly above the standard clinical range after treatment.

Still, he adds, "The existential crisis in the world of men's health is that figuring out who is and who is not a candidate for TRT is mostly driven by consumerism and partially driven by science. Easy access is less 'medicine' and more transactional."

Mills is referring to the rise of walk-in and online low-T clinics, where testosterone is sold like hair gel. The hormone regulates energy, libido, body fat, and muscle growth, and it's now available at chains with names that blur the line between irony and idiocy: Gameday, Maximus, and the like. Texas has become a stronghold (cheap rent), and Los Angeles remains fertile ground, thanks to its broken dreams and body dysmorphia.

Testosterone can be prescribed as gels, patches, pills, or injections. All forms suppress your body's own testosterone production.

TRT has been around for decades. What has changed is how it is prescribed and marketed. Levels of testosterone in American men have dropped by roughly 50 percent over the last half century, and prescriptions have surged alongside that decline. (This so-called decline is largely due to the growth in awareness and testing.) One popular drug saw a fourfold jump in scripts between 2003 and 2013. From 2019 to 2024, overall numbers jumped another 150 percent, from 7 million to 11 million. What once required a full diagnostic workup now often amounts to a form and a 30-second blood draw.

The result is a new kind of patient. The average guy walking into a low-T clinic is not trying to solve a medical problem; he is trying to get jacked. Mills says the "bro science" logic that every man should be on testosterone is beginning to affect how the treatment is prescribed. Influencers like Joe Rogan, Dax Shepard, and even RFK Jr. have become unofficial spokesmen, touting

ILLUSTRATION BY **MICHELLE SPEARMAN**

their regimens, or at least their results, on massive platforms. The industry itself, appropriately, is now on steroids.

Doctors like Mills say the bigger issue with TRT going mainstream is the potential for clinics to skip basic safety protocols. "The No. 1 rule in screening is to identify and reverse reversible causes," he says. That means addressing poor nutrition, sleep, or exercise first. Skipping this step doesn't just overlook nuance. It can miss diabetes, depression, obesity, or serious cardiovascular problems. One screener that's largely been abandoned: morning wood. "If a guy is still waking up with erections, his cardiovascular system and T levels are probably OK," Mills says.

Mills advises starting with a proper blood test, ruling out fixable issues, and prescribing only if both symptoms and numbers warrant it. When that process is rushed, patients suffer. He treats men who felt great the first week, then crashed into mood swings and depression after dosages backfired or because walk-in clinics missed the actual underlying cause. There are long-term consequences too. Some regimens shut down sperm production entirely, and in certain cases, it doesn't return.

Still, Mills acknowledges that getting it wrong today isn't as dangerous as it once was. Roid rage, testicular shutdown, fatal liver conditions—those stories are mostly relics. Two widely cited studies from 2011 and 2013 that linked TRT to heart attacks and strokes have since been debunked.

And so Mills, like more and more urologists, finds himself cautiously optimistic. "These days, I'll write a prescription for a guy who might be on the low end of normal, if there's potential for better quality of life," he says. "I'm meeting more patients where they are."

He also sees the clinics, however messy, as serving a need. Awareness is up, demand is undeniable, and clinics are moving faster than institutions can adapt. "It's no secret that a lot of these low-T centers have stolen our cookbook," Mills says. "Anyone who can do a Google search has access to our recipes. I just want more clinics to take responsible stewardship of these people's lives, not just of their credit card."

BEAST MODE (LITERALLY)

WHY THE FITNESS WORLD IS GETTING ON ALL FOURS.

BY JON WILDE

A FEW MONTHS BACK, I found myself crawling around my Brooklyn apartment after I'd severely fucked up my back. Turns out that haphazard double kettlebell snatches and a mildly herniated L5-S1 disc don't mix. A doctor I "visited" over Zoom prescribed all sorts of pills, including a weapons-grade opioid that only reinforced my diagnosis.

Three weeks later, I was back on all fours in my living room, only this time with slightly less swearing. In my eagerness to self-rehabilitate, I'd tripped into something called primal movement.

You've probably seen flashes of it on social media: people vaguely mimicking the way a gorilla or bear or lizard moves, all in a kind of choreographed flow that looks like a break-dancer on shrooms. Broadly, it's known as primal movement, evangelized by a lawless, disconnected agglomeration of gurus and training programs strewn across YouTube and social media. (The hashtag #primalmovement has more than 100,000 posts on Instagram.) The most well-known variation, Animal Flow (founded in 2010), claims over 10,000 certified instructors in 42 countries.

It's one of Animal Flow's master instructors, John Weeks, who gives me the inside dope on why primal movement matters. Weeks is bald and in his 40s, like me. Unlike me, he is lean and kinetic—watching him as he twists and swivels in videos is mesmerizing. He also happens to be a black belt–level martial artist who runs the Tough Temple gym in Bethesda, Maryland. Six years ago, recovering from cancer surgery and chemo, he was in constant pain and looking for a new way to move. Primal movement gave him his body back.

"Animal Flow is quadrupedal movement training," Weeks says. "By bringing four points of contact with the ground, it develops the function and resilience of the human animal."

Skeptics will argue that primal movement is just calisthenics and mobility work repackaged with some Liver King–tinged paleo flair. That it can't build muscle or endurance or speed. (Weeks still lifts weights.) So why bother?

Crucially, to reclaim the flexibility and stability that so many of us have lost to desk jobs, screen time, and age. Primal movement tests the limits of how your body moves through space, and it will remind you that joints can sweep, pivot, and extend in ways you've probably long since stopped exploring. Weeks has seen primal movement humble pro athletes and desk jockeys alike. Moves that seem childishly simple, like crab walks, scorpion reaches, and traveling ape steps, reveal deficits in hips, shoulders, and wrists that you never knew existed. "It is kind of the assessment and the fix together," Weeks says.

Though for Weeks and for many of his clients, the real draw is not just mobility but play. "It is very liberating, and it gives you permission to make mistakes and laugh at it," he says. His type A, hard-charging clients often find themselves coming back as much for that freedom as for the bulletproof rotator cuffs.

Yes, you can break primal movement into progressions and reps. (Weeks does that for athletes.) But the joy is in the all-fours experimentation, the moment when you remember that working out does not have to be work. And looking ridiculous, like a lizard on pavement, you might start to feel like yourself again.

ILLUSTRATION BY **MICHELLE SPEARMAN**

THE TRUTH ABOUT THE SUPPLEMENT THAT SOCIAL MEDIA WON'T SHUT UP ABOUT.

BY JON WILDE

THE INSIDE DOPE ON CREA–TINE

IF YOU'RE A MALE of any age on social media, you will have seen at least one ad with a shirtless guy holding a bag of Skittles-colored gummies, telling you about how you would be clinically insane not to be using creatine. He'll say that it boosts your energy, strength, even brainpower. The message is clear: Creatine works, and everyone is on it. *So why aren't you?*

This isn't creatine's first big moment. Back in the '90s, every teen with frosted tips and athlete channeling Mark McGwire chugged water bottles of the stuff, dealing with cottonmouth in the quest to get jacked. Now creatine's back, but this time in the wellness aisle, next to the magnesium and fish oil.

To figure out what part of the creatine hype train holds up, we talked to Scott Forbes, Ph.D., a professor in the department of physical education studies at Brandon University and a sports nutritionist certified by the International Society of Sports Nutrition. He's been researching creatine for nearly 20 years, since it came in a black plastic tub that smelled like a wrestling mat. Here's your Ph.D.-level primer on the world's most popular supplement.

WHAT *IS* CREATINE, REALLY?

Creatine is made from three amino acids, the building blocks of proteins. Your muscles absorb creatine, store it, and, when needed, convert a chunk into phosphocreatine, a type of stored energy. It's high-octane fuel, the kind your muscles tap into for moments of peak output.

"It would be like drag racing," Forbes says. "Really fast, really intense—that's the particular energy system." Creatine won't kick in for endurance scenarios, but it will help you sprint a little harder, grunt out one more heavy rep, and generally make you a little more beastly for short bursts. Compounded over plenty of gym sessions, those bonus reps and steps should add up.

IS THIS STUFF ACTUALLY SAFE?

When we talk about creatine, we're mostly talking about creatine monohydrate, the pristine powdered form that creatine takes in the vast majority of supplements. "There have been over 685 randomized controlled studies on creatine," Forbes says. That's more scientific attention than many prescription drugs get.

Worth knowing: The supply chain is surprisingly tight. Creatine monohydrate is produced by only a handful of manufacturers across two countries: Germany and China. Top-tier manufacturers, like Creapure in Germany, will often be listed by name on supplement packaging as a trusted source.

HOW MUCH IS ENOUGH?

The human body synthesizes its own creatine and absorbs more from foods like red meat,

MAX-OUT MIX
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poultry, eggs, and seafood. When you add creatine as a supplement, you're expanding the reserves. Most creatine supplements are dosed at five grams a day, whether it's in gummy form or a powdered scoop that you toss into a shake. But that's a one-size-fits-all dose that may not fit *you*. "We actually recommend 0.1 grams per kilogram of body weight," says Forbes. So by that measure, a 200-pound guy should be taking about 10 grams per day—not five—to get the full benefits.

WHAT'S ALL THIS ABOUT LOADING?

Some of those social media pitchmen talk about how newcomers should try "loading" creatine: taking 20 grams a day for the first week or so. That's because creatine needs a moment to saturate your muscles (where, once it builds up a presence, it will remain for four to six weeks). Forbes says loading is unnecessary, unless you're impatient and willing to chance some gastrointestinal distress.

Speaking of which: If creatine makes your gut feel off, just dial back your dosage to two or three grams a day, take it with food, and your body should acclimate. And good news: OD'ing is tough. Forbes mentions a patient who consistently took 200 grams daily and dealt with kidney issues. Mostly, though, taking more than Forbes's math suggests will leave your body ditching the extra creatine (and you wasting money in the process).

WILL IT BOOST YOUR BRAIN?

The short answer: no, probably not. "But wait," you're thinking, "the sweaty guy on my phone screen says he read some science about it." He might've! Some recent research has seen creatine supplementation boost cognition in specific instances where the brain is deeply stressed: hardcore sleep deprivation, intense mental fatigue, or oxygen-deprived situations. (Think high altitudes or a traumatic brain injury.) That hopefully doesn't describe you. So while a creatine-enhanced shake a day may help you get biceps like Jeremy Allen White, it will not have you running day trades like Warren Buffett.

There *are* other early-days research results pointing toward more potential side benefits of creatine, though: It might spur stronger bone structure ("that's kind of an emerging area that's pretty exciting," says Forbes) and protect against CTE (chronic traumatic encephalopathy) or concussion effects. But none of the new research is conclusive enough to be a selling point yet.

SHOULD YOU TAKE IT?

Creatine is fairly cheap, safe, and well supported by science, and if you're doing anything explosive or strength-based (lifting, sprinting, playing sports), then it will probably help. What it won't do is get you swole overnight. Though as all those frosted-tip Mark McGwire fans learned, maybe that's not the worst thing.

ILLUSTRATION BY **MICHELLE SPEARMAN**

SUNSCREEN PANIC

SOCIAL MEDIA STARS SAY THAT SUNSCREEN WILL KILL YOU. (THE SUN: "HOLD MY BEER.")

BY WILL COCKRELL

WELLNESS INFLUENCERS on TikTok insist sunscreen is poison. Some smear beef tallow on their faces; others ditch sun protection altogether. Online, sunscreen is cast as a villain: toxic, Big Pharma–backed, even chakra-blocking.

But science doesn't budge: The sun causes cancer, and one in five Americans will get it.

"There is no question that sun rays cause cancer," says Dr. Larisa Geskin, professor of dermatology at Columbia University Medical Center and director of its Comprehensive Skin Cancer Center. "That is 100 percent proven."

That hasn't stopped the rise of the anti-sunscreen movement. It's not just the beef tallow bros. There's a general sense that nobody really knows what's safe anymore.

Even Kelly Slater, widely considered the greatest surfer of all time and possibly the most sun-exposed human on earth, once bragged that he almost never wore sunscreen. Then, in 2024, at 52, he came out with a sunscreen, and it wasn't about his deepening crow's feet. Slater had evolved, becoming more aware of the dangers of unprotected sun exposure but also a little leery of the conflicting data on sunscreen's efficacy and the claims that sunscreen itself could be causing harm. When he launched Freaks of Nature, a zinc- and titanium-based sunscreen made with seaweed and algae, it was clear he had done the research: Mineral-based physical-barrier sunscreen is the most effective and controversy-free protection out there.

"Both types of sunscreen, physical and chemical, are effective at the right concentrations," says Geskin. Most big brands hit those numbers; problems tend to be with expired or heat-damaged bottles. "But we now believe that physical sunblocks are the best and healthiest."

The chemicals that Geskin is referring to show up in most commercially available sunscreens: oxybenzone, octinoxate, and avobenzone, the UVA and UVB chemical filters that are absorbed into skin and convert sunlight to heat as opposed to blocking it. They've been flagged by the Food and Drug Administration as potentially hormone-disrupting and scrutinized for possible cancer links, in part because they appear across personal-care products like lotion and shaving cream. There's also evidence that these chemicals harm coral reefs.

What pushed these sunscreens to the top of the FDA's to-do list was the lack of data on how much of these chemicals we absorb with regular use. That concern prompted rigorous, third-party studies that earned prominent coverage in *JAMA (Journal of the American Medical Association)*. The studies found that several sunscreen ingredients are absorbed into the bloodstream in amounts that exceed the FDA's threshold for what is considered definitively safe.

"It was still a small fraction being absorbed by our skin," says Geskin. "But, yes, it was more than expected." This is where, Geskin says, the message may have been hijacked.

Some seized on the *JAMA* report as proof that the industry was negligent, the sort of whistle-blowing that is red meat for the TikTok monster, which roars so loud, it drowns out crucial context. Meanwhile, mineral-based sunblock, that chalky stuff that looks like white war paint, was deemed harmless. It creates a physical, nonchemical barrier between the sun and your skin and is considered reef-safe. Hence, the boom in physical-barrier sunscreens. That 2020 viral photo of a pre-swagged-out Mark Zuckerberg foil surfing in Hawaii, his face painted like a mime in Paris? People laughed. But the dude might've been onto something. And now Slater's algae-and-zinc blend falls on the same side: Armor first, debate later.

Geskin says any decent sunscreen, whether chemical or physical, is better than none at all. Unfortunately, armed with only the first half of the argument, too many people have put chemical sunscreen in the penalty box indefinitely. Some have even revived the old case for a little unprotected sunlight for vitamin D and circadian rhythm. Scientists say very short weekly exposure, on the order of minutes, covers that.

Many hold up the *JAMA* moment as the FDA working exactly as designed: bringing attention to questionable data that manufacturers might miss. But here's the real takeaway: The studies proved the chemicals enter our bodies. We don't yet know if that exposure is harmful. What we do know is that melanoma is one of the deadliest and most aggressive cancers, and 20 Americans die from it every day, with sun exposure the leading cause. So the real crux of the debate is nothing more than a simple question: What scares you most, the *JAMA* findings or the cancer stats?

Geskin says she's still surprised that it isn't vanity driving more of us to slather the stuff on. "I would think that sun-induced aging would be the thing that men would be persuaded by," she says. "It's another thing we know for sure—the sun causes wrinkles and destroys your skin."

ILLUSTRATION BY **MICHELLE SPEARMAN**

2025 PLAYMATE

Gayeanne

FROM THE PHILIPPINES TO L.A. BY WAY OF THE WORLD, MISS FEBRUARY **GAYEANNE HAZLEWOOD** HAS NO PLANS TO STAY STILL.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY **ARNIE WATKINS**

In 2019, Gayeanne packed festival clothes for Coachella, not expecting her modeling agency to suggest she try modeling in Los Angeles for a few weeks. What was supposed to be a two-month stint stretched into six years and a successful career that's taken her from Guess campaigns to this very *Playboy* shoot.

Just a few years ago at 17, she was pulling double shifts in Hawaii (Brandy Melville during the day, steakhouse hostess at night) while finishing high school and saving money. "A lot of people think I came from a rich family and everything was handed to me," the 25-year-old says. "I love doing my own thing and being independent."

Growing up in the Philippines taught her resilience, she says, and she credits her grandmother with helping to raise her and her 25 cousins. "She's a badass," Gayeanne says, grinning. She adds that her grandmother ran a store at the elementary school. During lunch breaks, all the kids would gather around, eating her grandmother's homemade Filipino snacks like *turon* (fried plantains) and *kwek-kwek* (fried quail eggs). The matriarch's cooking—endless varieties of soups and traditional dishes—created the foundation of comfort food that Gayeanne still craves. She calls her mom in L.A. to request specific meals when homesickness strikes. (Her mom is more than happy to oblige.)

Gayeanne's appetite for new experiences and places has only grown, often with a culinary bent. She's been to Bali, Indonesia, four times; explored Korea; walked through Pompeii's ancient streets; and hiked Switzerland's seven lakes near the Matterhorn—a view she describes as "what I imagine heaven looks like." However, the cheese fondue in Zermatt, Switzerland, remains legendary: "I still think about dipping the steak in that cheese to this day."

In L.A., Gayeanne has a weekly Sunday gathering, hitting the farmers market to prepare salmon poke bowls, grilled steaks, or mango salad for her close friends. These intimate dinners often involve wine and *Game of Thrones* marathons—surprising for someone who dislikes medieval shows but somehow became hooked on rewatching the HBO hit. "My boyfriend and I even watch conspiracy theory videos about the show," she says, laughing.

Chapman, her boyfriend, embodies the adventurous spirit that Gayeanne values most. "He'll try anything, whether that's a new food or going on a trip with me," she says. He's also been supportive of her career ambitions, surprising her with vlogging equipment and connecting her with industry opportunities.

This fall, her scattered family will reunite in the Philippines for the first time in years—her divorced parents, all her siblings, and, most important, her grandmother. "I can't remember the last time we were all together," she says. After building her independent life across continents, going home feels like the ultimate adventure. —SEAN EVANS

What part of yourself were you hoping people would see when you became a Playmate?

For me being a Playmate is a form of art, and I was hoping people would see my sensuality as expressive and elegant and not just sexualized.

If your bedroom had a name, what would it be?

If my bedroom had a name, it would be Cloud Nine. It's really cozy—I have, like, a fluffy rug, my silk sheets, my really comfy, cozy pillows.

What's something people assume about you that's totally wrong?

People assume that everything is handed to me. I work superhard for everything that I have. I've been independent since I was 17, and I love it. I love working hard.

What's something you do only when you're totally alone?

When I'm totally alone, I sing, I dance, I play music. I replay a lot of the arguments, my comebacks that I should have said and done. And I pretend like I'm in a reality show. It's so fun.

What are you most passionate about?

I'm most passionate about working on myself. I'm really big on self-growth; I am passionate about keeping my body healthy. I love working out; I love hiking; I love being outdoors. I just want to also spread love everywhere I go.

What do you become after midnight?

After midnight, I'm a big snacker. I love snacking.

If you could text your younger self one sentence, what would it say?

If I could text my younger self one sentence, it would be "Enjoy every moment."

What song makes you feel like the hottest person in the room?

A song that makes me feel like the hottest in the room is "The Way I Are" by Timbaland. It's so good. I play it every day when I'm getting ready, when I'm in the shower, doing my skin care. It's the best. It's older, but it's a vibe. It's a bop.

STYLING BY **RACHEL THORSON**. MAKEUP BY **ALIANA MOSS**. HAIR BY **ANASTASIIA TEREBOVA**.

THE BOURBON GLUT

Blanton's
THE ORIGINAL SINGLE BARREL BOURBON WHISKEY
OLD FITZGERALD
BOTTLED-IN-BOND
7 YEARS AGED
KENTUCKY STRAIGHT BOURBON WHISKEY
WHEATED BOURBON MASHBILL
100 PROOF
Eagle Rare
AGED 12 YEARS
KENTUCKY STRAIGHT BOURBON WHISKEY
45% ALC/VOL
OLD SWAGGER
STRAIGHT BOURBON WHISKEY
AGED 12 YEARS
BOTTLED IN BOND
RISING TIDE
LIMITED EDITION
KNOB CREEK
KENTUCKY STRAIGHT BOURBON WHISKEY
21 AGED TWENTY ONE YEARS
CLERMONT, KENTUCKY
100 PROOF

FOR THE PAST FEW YEARS, HUNTING DOWN RARE WHISKEYS WAS A BLOOD SPORT. NOW IT'S LIKE SHOOTING FISH IN A BARREL.

By Sean Evans

After years of scarcity and secondary market prices that made buying a bottle feel like applying for a mortgage, the bourbon bubble has finally burst, and whiskey lovers are about to reap the rewards. Distilleries are beginning to flood shelves with aged stock. The result? A golden age for bourbon drinkers.

It's happening because overproduction is colliding with post-Covid-19 consumption decline. The proof lies in Heaven Hill's newly launched Old Fitzgerald 7-Year-Old, which has a suggested retail price (SRP) of $59—a price point that would have been laughable two years ago. Or Buffalo Trace's new Eagle Rare 12-year for $50.

"Years ago, distilleries had the forethought to say, 'We need more aged product,'" says Ryan Mills, a whiskey educator and content creator known as @ThatOneDudeRyan. "We're seeing more products move past 10 years, much of it fantastic stuff. Twelve-year shelf-stable bottles for $50? Buy those all day long."

"Many distilleries—small, medium, or large—are hurting now, so they're doing things they otherwise wouldn't," says Prav Saraff, owner of 1 West Dupont Circle Wines & Liquors in Washington, DC. "Knob Creek putting out a 21-year-old. Or Blanton's. A year ago, we got a handful of bottles. Recently, we get cases. Now we can put it in more hands at SRP."

At Heaven Hill, master distiller Conor O'Driscoll is sitting pretty with 2.1 million whiskey barrels aging—the largest holding of bourbon six years and over. "We have 15 percent of all bourbon in the world," he says. Heaven Hill's philosophy is refreshingly long-term: family operated, no investors breathing down their necks, just aging whiskey and waiting.

Old Fitzgerald 7-Year Bottled-in-Bond, created under O'Driscoll's watch, was born from the desire to meld the limited Old Fitz decanter editions with mass reach. Borrowing from the 2019 Heaven Hill Bottled-in-Bond launch, Old Fitzgerald 7-Year's rollout was teased "two years ago at our national sales meeting," O'Driscoll says. "The timing happens to be serendipitous."

The democratization of unicorn bottles is real. How should you navigate this new landscape? Build relationships with store owners, says Saraff, because nobody knows inventory like the person who signs for the deliveries. Be curious. Ask questions. "Maybe what you want was delivered but not yet shelved," he says. "The more genuine the conversation, the better your chances of walking out with something exceptional."

Don't be tempted by price alone; there's no need to spend your kid's college fund. "Taste broadly," O'Driscoll says. "Educate your palate." A good way to do that is by sharing whiskey with friends, because hoarding defeats the purpose of this whole glorious moment.

Be cognizant of the labels, specifically the whiskey's distilling location. "There are nondistilling producers and blenders doing great things with high-age whiskey from Indiana," Mills says and adds that Rolling Tide Spirits' Old Swagger, a 12-year, 100-proof bottled-in-bond bourbon from Indiana, "really hits—it's delicious."

Age statements matter, but only to a point. "There are expensive bourbons with big, fat age statements that taste like dirty old sticks," O'Driscoll says. "They've been in the barrel too long."

Mills says don't chase hype bottles at their launch—the prices are too high. "Google the SRP for the bottle to see if you should wait," he says. "For example, Eagle Rare 12 is overpriced now, but it will come down over time."

The bourbon market has taught us that scarcity creates desire, but abundance creates joy. This golden age won't last forever; market corrections never do. For now, enjoy filling your home bar with exceptional aged whiskey without emptying your wallet.

Michelin-Worthy at Home: Sesame Ginger Old-Fashioned

A silky, savory cocktail that will be your new fave.

At the Clemente Bar, hidden above New York City's three-Michelin-starred Eleven Madison Park, beverage director Sebastian Tollius retools classic cocktails with bold, minimalist technique. "Time is one of our best ingredients," he says. Tollius swears by fat-washing: infusing liquor with fat, then chilling to leave flavor behind. This old-fashioned riff, fat-washed with sesame oil and layered with ginger syrup, proves you don't need esoteric spirits or elaborate gear to make something complex. "Always use fresh ingredients, the highest-quality spirits you can afford, and measure by weight, not volume—it gives you a truer ratio," Tollius says.

THE RECIPE

STEP 01
FAT-WASH THE WHISKY

Mix 75 grams sesame oil with 750 milliliters Japanese whisky. Shake and freeze overnight. Remove fat cap, then strain.

STEP 02
MAKE THE GINGER SYRUP

Boil 227 grams water, 114 grams Demerara sugar, and 56 grams shredded ginger. Simmer for 15 minutes. Steep for 30 to 45 seconds, then strain.

STEP 03
BUILD THE DRINK

Combine 2.5 ounces of the whisky, 0.5 ounces of the syrup, and 3 to 4 dashes of orange bitters. Garnish with orange peel.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY **CODY GUILFOYLE**

POSTCARD FROM RIO The bikinis are small, the sun is relentless, and the caipirinhas are calling.

THIS PAGE: BRAZIL PHOTOS/LIGHT ROCKET VIA GETTY IMAGES. OPPOSITE: DAVID BURTON/TRUNK ARCHIVE.

BEACH HERE NOW

Sure, you can book an all-inclusive, drink watered-down rum, and call it a vacation. Or you can dial up a beach break that's far more exciting. These five, from Rio to the Aegean, are running hot right now. Plan a trip to one next year and make that PTO count.

By Ellen Carpenter

↑ RIO DE JANEIRO, BRAZIL

For going solo (but not staying that way)

WHY NOW Rio continues to exert its magnetic pull. A global leader in minimalist swimwear, its beach culture spreads an inhibitions-dissolving aura through a city built for connection: joining pickup soccer on Copacabana, surfing at Arpoador, and sampling batidas (cocktails) and ice-cold draft chope in Botafogo. Cariocas—Rio natives—are famously friendly (and hot) with an easygoing vibe that invites conversation. Samba clubs in Largo da Prainha spill into the streets, and beach bars blur day into night.

WHERE TO STAY The Philippe Starck–designed Hotel Fasano in the heart of Ipanema. Though it opened in 2007, it's still one of the sexiest properties in Rio. Rooms feature Starck's Dalí-inspired ear-shaped mirrors and chairs by Sergio Rodrigues, the father of Brazilian design. Post up at the rooftop infinity pool to watch the sunset while sipping a Carioca tonic with your new, um, friends.

WHEN TO GO For a full-on party, book for Carnival in February or March, just before Lent. Otherwise, April or May bring manageable 80-degree days without the chaos.

← BODRUM, TURKEY

For hedonism with a history degree

WHY NOW This city on the Turquoise Coast has transformed from a cheap and cheerful escape for sun-starved Brits into the Aegean's answer to Ibiza, a Mykonos East, or the Turkish Saint-Tropez. Call it what you will, Bodrum has one of the ritziest beach party scenes with a slew of new five-star hotels and all-day beach clubs, like Maçakızı and Xuma, luring celebs, yachting Euro tech moguls, and Turkish gilded youth. But away from table dancing and bottle popping, these hills are alive with history. You'll find fortification ruins tucked into hillsides, a Crusader castle built with stones from the Mausoleum of Halicarnassus, and a Greco-Roman theater overlooking the sea. Come for 21st-century kicks; leave ready to start a podcast on classical antiquity.

WHERE TO STAY Scorpios Bodrum, the revered Mykonos beach club's second outpost, which opened last year. But this one offers a place to sleep when the DJ calls it a night. Book one of its 12 villas, complete with private pools and spectacular ocean views. After Mykonos-like dancing, dedicate your day to wellness: morning vinyasa, guided meditation, and sound healing. At the restaurant, graze on mezes and lamb chops cooked on an open fire.

WHEN TO GO From May to September, when it's warm enough to swim. The crowds cool off in October, but so do the temps.

PORT ANTONIO, JAMAICA →

For a group trip that gets loud

WHY NOW On Jamaica's lush northeastern coast, Port Antonio remains an oddly preserved paradise, a town that somehow stays semisecret despite its film résumé. James Bond retires here in *No Time to Die*, trading espionage for surf and solitude (Ian Fleming's GoldenEye estate is nearby on Oracabessa Bay); Brooke Shields skinny-dips in *The Blue Lagoon*; and Tom Cruise canoodles with Elisabeth Shue at Reach Falls in *Cocktail*. Yet it's far from the all-inclusive bustle of Montego Bay or Negril. The beaches, like Frenchman's Cove and Winnifred Beach, are just sick: soft, golden sand; rarely a crowd; always a stone's throw from jerk chicken. Just ask any cab driver for their favorite.

WHERE TO STAY Pompey, the off-the-grid retreat created by superstar DJ Diplo on 50 acres above Port Antonio. Debuted a couple of years ago, it's what the Grammy-winning producer of acts like M.I.A., The Weeknd, and Madonna has called "the greatest project [he's] been able to make happen." Initially just for friends and family, it's now available for private booking—which means you and, say, your 10 closest (best-heeled) friends can bunk down in this five-bedroom, four-bathroom brutalist marvel. There's an infinity pool, a climbing wall, a helicopter pad, and, if you want to lay down a few tracks, a state-of-the-art recording studio billed as "a sonic bunker in the jungle."

WHEN TO GO From December to April, when the weather is best. Avoid hurricane season, which typically runs from June to November.

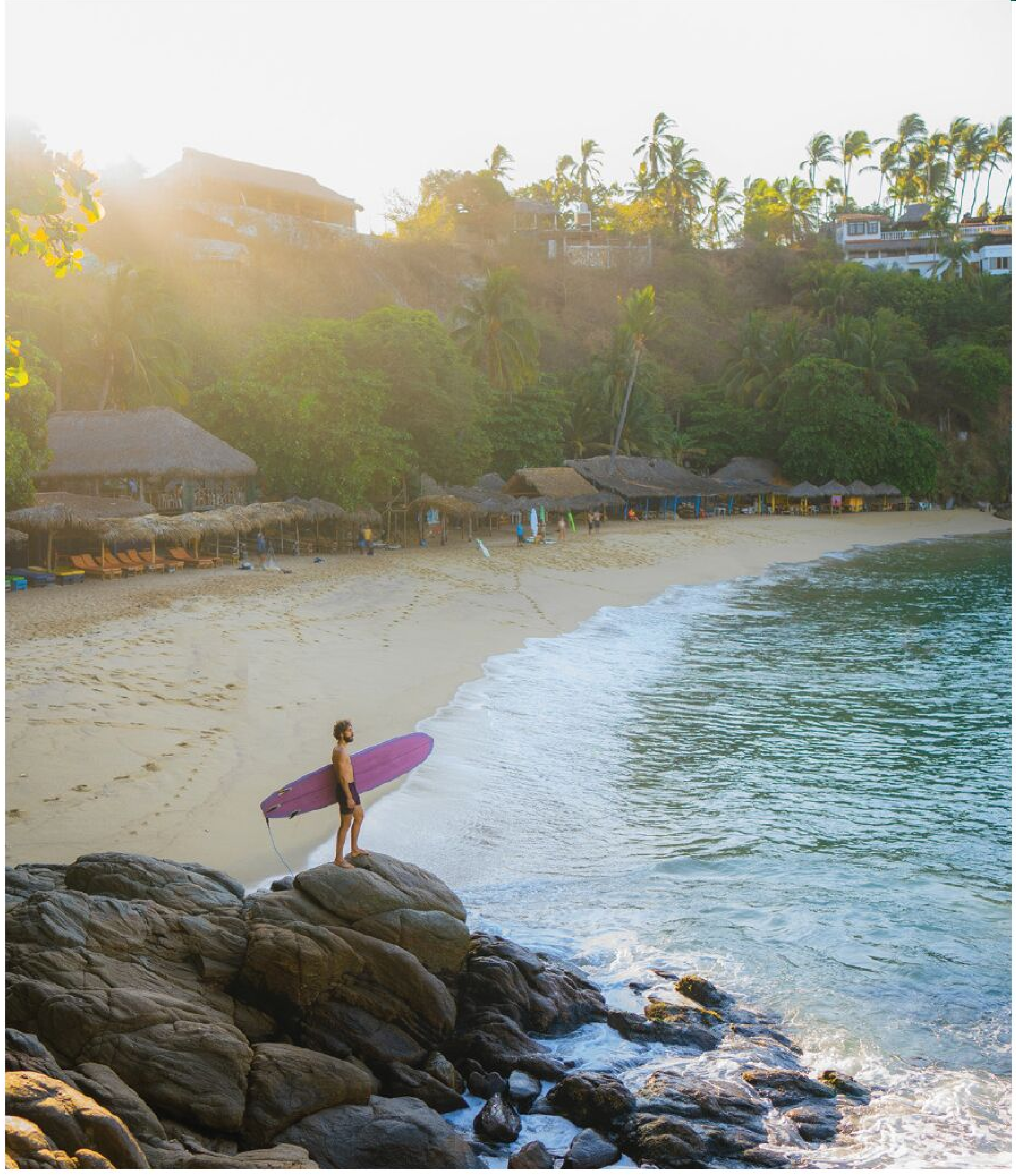
DHËRMI, ALBANIA →

For the "I went before it blew up" factor

WHY NOW Remember when your IG feed was flooded with pictures of Croatia? Next year it'll be Albania, so do yourself a favor and go now. Packed with unspoiled beaches and ravey nightlife, the 75-mile southern stretch of the coast has already been branded the Albanian Riviera, and so far it's free of the douchey yacht crowd that's overtaken much of Greece. Some of the best beaches are in the village of Dhërmi, a Santorini look-alike of whitewashed stone houses built along a slope of the Ceraunian Mountains that leads to the Ionian Sea. The 20-minute walk from the parking lot to Gjipe Beach keeps crowds away, and at the more accessible Dhërmi Beach, it's easy to rent lounge chairs and buy drinks. Dhërmi is also gaining a rep among dance-music lovers; Kala, a weeklong music and wellness festival, takes place every June.

WHERE TO STAY Zoe Hora, for sweet views of the sea and Old Town Dhërmi. The hotel has 38 rooms scattered throughout stone homes within the mountaintop village; the main building has two restaurants, a café, and an infinity pool. While the upscale Zoe Hora Restaurant serves up a killer sunset alongside grilled sea bass, you'll have a better time at the more casual Zymo Square, where you can learn the traditional Albanian *valle* dance between bites of lamb stew.

WHEN TO GO If parties are a priority, then opt for high season, July and August. For a slightly slower pace but still 80-degree days, come in late spring or early autumn.



← PUERTO ESCONDIDO, MEXICO

To see if a new relationship works outside your zip code

WHY NOW This Oaxacan coastal town with "hidden" in its name still has shades of the wild port community it was in the late '70s—a place where one-lane dirt roads end with killer waves crashing on golden sands. While today's vibe is less Baja jackets and fish shacks and more Billy Reid chore coats and tamarind-mezcal cocktails, the lack of direct U.S. flights has helped spare Puerto Escondido from Tulum influencers. This makes it a gorgeous setting to test if a new relationship has staying power. Embrace Puerto's adventurous spirit: Take a beginner's surf class on Playa Zicatela, swim with the locals at Roca Blanca, see where those unmarked dirt roads take you, and sweat out your demons at a temescal—followed up by a cold Pacifico, or three.

WHERE TO STAY Casa Yuma, an adults-only property that opened on Playa Los Naranjos in 2024 with 25 minimalist-designed rooms. There's an open-air restaurant serving ceviches and moles (plus club sandwiches and burgers), a beach bar, a pool, and a spa offering massages and facials. Feel free to bring your laptop to the thatched-roof coworking space. Just don't plan on getting much accomplished.

WHEN TO GO Go in the dry season, November to April, with January and February being the sweet spot.

THIS PAGE, FROM TOP: **ASCENTXMEDIA/E+ VIA GETTY IMAGES; OLEH SLOBODENIUK/E+ VIA GETTY IMAGES.** OPPOSITE, FROM TOP: **JOHANNES SCHWARK** (SCORPIOS BODRUM); **DEPASQUALE MAFFINI** (POMPEY).

TIME IS NOT REAL

A radical new theory says we've been thinking about clocks all wrong. What if it's right? **BY JESSE WILL**

WE CAN SPLIT AN ATOM, simulate the Big Bang, and map a black hole's gravitational field. We can track eclipses to the second. But as of 2025, physicists still don't know what time actually is. They can't even agree on whether it's real or an illusion.

Meanwhile, you're just out here… living. Brushing your teeth. Sleeping at night. Acting like the glowing digits on the microwave are gospel. All while the deepest rift in physics remains unsolved: Quantum mechanics and general relativity, the two pillars of modern science, do not agree on time. One says it's fixed and absolute. The other says it's bendy and local. Both can't be right. How could you possibly eat at a time like this?!

"It's kind of embarrassing," says Chiara Marletto, Ph.D., an Italian theoretical physicist and a research fellow at Oxford University. "Time appears in equations. But physics doesn't tell you what it actually is."

Legendary British physicist Julian Barbour, Ph.D., has been publishing on this topic since the 1970s. Now 88, he doesn't mince words: "People have been trying to solve the problem of time for 70 years. And they haven't solved it. There are physicists who say, 'Oh, it's not a problem.' I think they're doing a disservice to science."

Enter constructor theory, a radical physics rethink that's been quietly gaining buzz over the past decade. A few months back, Marletto and her collaborator, David Deutsch, Ph.D., a British quantum physicist, aimed the theory at physics' most persistent blind spot: time itself. Instead of just asking what time *is* in their new paper, they suggest we've been thinking backward.

"Laws of motion are reversible at the microscopic scale," Marletto says. "And yet we live in an irreversible world. That's a very old problem. Constructor theory is a new statement about it."

This flips the usual narrative. In classical physics, time's arrow is an afterthought, a statistical artifact of how disorder tends to increase. Entropy rises not because it has to, but because it's just wildly improbable for entropy to do anything else.

Constructor theory doesn't buy that. Instead of shrugging at improbability, it builds irreversibility into the foundations. If no machine (a "constructor") can perform the reverse task, then that task is fundamentally impossible. "A scrambled egg doesn't reassemble because there's no constructor that can do it reliably," says Marletto.

Time has a direction because certain things are simply impossible to reverse. No clever machine or process can reliably undo them. It's the difference between "won't happen" and "can't happen." Traditional physics focuses on what won't happen due to astronomical odds. Constructor theory identifies what actually can't happen, period.

That's also where clocks come in. A clock is just a system that reliably performs a sequence of transformations, ticking forward in a predictable order. (Without clocks, things would still evolve and change. You just couldn't measure when or how long.) You don't start with "time" and then build a clock. You start with what physical transformations are possible. Clocks (and time) emerge from that. Yesterday, from constructor theory's point of view, is nothing mystical, just the current arrangement of the universe plus the records that point backward.

If constructor theory's take on time holds up, it could reshape the foundations of physics. The direction of time would be a built-in feature of the universe's operating manual. That could change how we approach the biggest questions: How did the universe begin? What is consciousness? How does physical reality actually work?

Not everyone is convinced. "It sounds intelligent," says Sabine Hossenfelder, Ph.D., a German theoretical physicist whose 1.7 million YouTube followers have made her one of science's most influential and outspoken skeptics. "But I can't say I understand what it means for a clock to 'make' time." Hossenfelder agrees that physics may need new conceptual tools. She's just not sure this is the one.

Then again, people said the same about Deutsch in the 1980s, when he first proposed quantum computing. His early papers were dismissed as too philosophical. Now he's credited as the father of quantum computing, defining a field that's gone from thought experiment to the multibillion dollar global race to build computers that could solve certain problems exponentially faster than any traditional machine. "It's a little like that," Marletto says. "At first you get strange looks. Then someone takes it seriously."

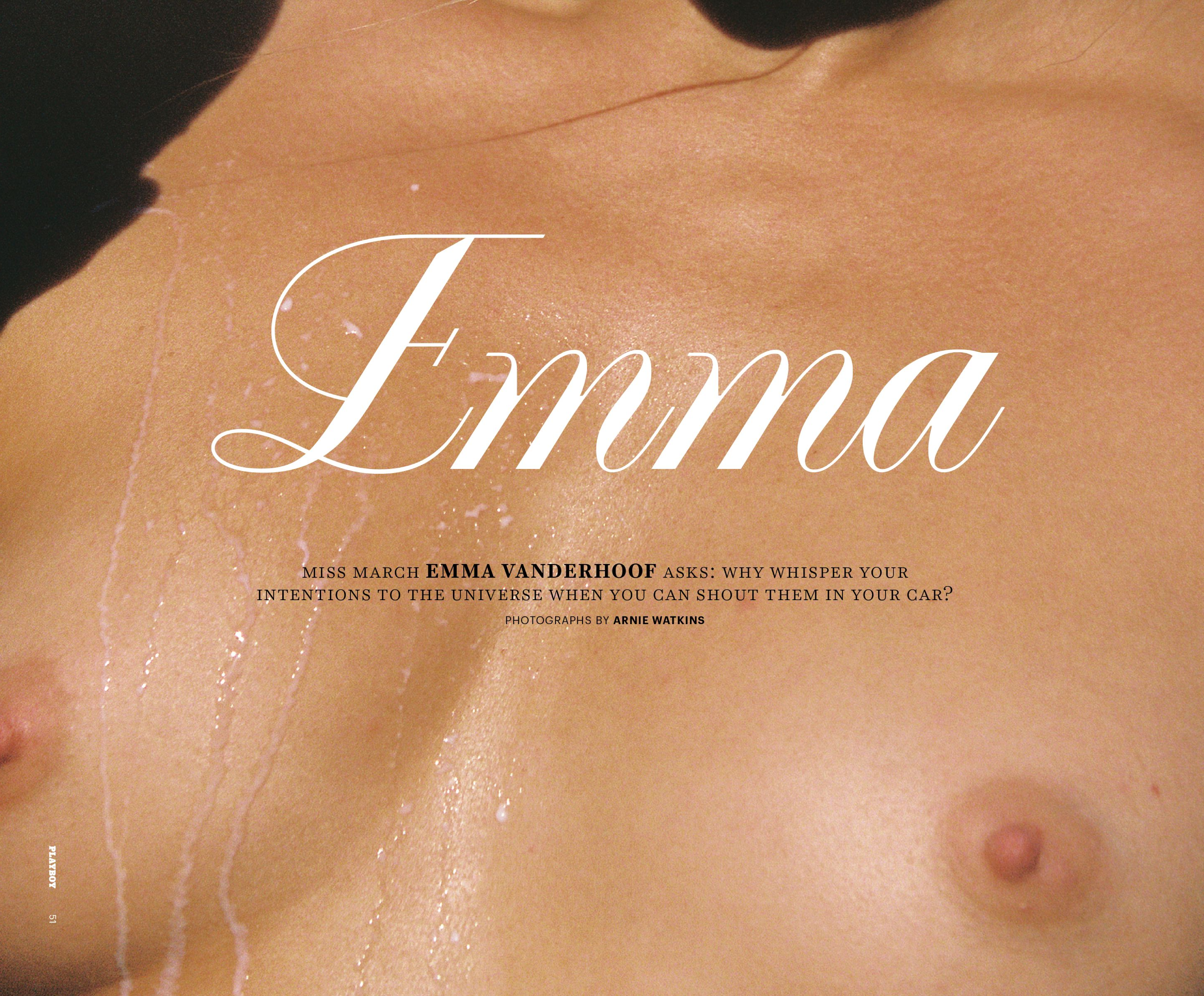
Still, she admits that she and Deutsch could be wrong. "The problem with science right now is that we use the same mathematical frameworks over and over," Marletto says. "Everything becomes a nail." Constructor theory is an attempt to escape that by embracing possibility, including the possibility of failure. "You have to be able to be wrong," she says. "Otherwise we just stay in the same place."

In a moment of deep skepticism about science, it feels almost subversive to hear a physicist embrace the possibility of being wrong. "It's a good way to look at things," says Marletto. "You don't stop asking just because you don't have the right tools yet."

But until constructor theory is validated, as Barbour says, "all we can prove about time is the present, you and me, here, now. The rest is memory, or speculation. So *carpe diem*."

ILLUSTRATION BY **TIM McDONAGH**

2025 PLAYMATE • 2025 PLAYMATE •



Emma

MISS MARCH **EMMA VANDERHOOF** ASKS: WHY WHISPER YOUR INTENTIONS TO THE UNIVERSE WHEN YOU CAN SHOUT THEM IN YOUR CAR?

PHOTOGRAPHS BY **ARNIE WATKINS**

I

"I always loved *Playboy*," Emma says, beaming. "It was always the background on my phone, and I had *Playboy* bunny stickers at the tanning bed." In 2018, she interviewed for Playmate of the Month and didn't get it. Seven years later, Emma's finally here: "I never thought this would happen. I felt like I manifested it."

The 31-year-old Phoenix native spent a decade modeling across Arizona, Miami, and now Los Angeles. "I wanted to be a special effects makeup artist, but I was doing great modeling, so that makeup dream took a back seat for a while," she shares. Inspired by a love of Stephen King and all things horror—she holds up a well-worn copy of King's *Fairy Tale* during this interview—Emma's dark side, as she calls it, now emerges in a different form of artistic expression: short stories.

Her writing journey began a decade ago, when she was sitting in a park with her sister, trying an exercise called automatic writing: "You close your eyes and write whatever comes to mind." During anxious or overwhelming periods, her release was writing these short stories, many of which were very dark. Now her writing has evolved with some poetry in the mix, though it's still intertwined with real life, addressing family struggles, addiction battles, and the aftermath of a bad relationship that followed her to L.A.

Despite her love of dark themes, Emma laughs loudly and often. "My best quality is being supergoofy," she says. "My sister says I'm like the female version of Jim Carrey." Emma explains that she uses her whole body to make people laugh or she makes silly sounds in restaurants. "When I feel safe, I'm silly, and I don't want to shy away from that."

Another personality trait that defines Emma is talking to herself. "I did Pilates today and got in my car after and told myself I did great and clapped," she says, grinning. Before castings, she screams in her car to release nervous energy, a technique that's actually helped her book jobs.

Family is everything for Emma. She dreams of waking up happy, surrounded by people who love her, and experiencing simple joys like trying new foods. Home is her sanctuary, shared with Archie, a 4-year-old rescue from Tijuana, Mexico. As an introvert who gets overstimulated easily, Emma finds peace in quiet moments with her pup and in the ritual of planning her day. "I decide what I'm having for dinner by 10 a.m.," she says, laughing.

"I want to see the world more," she says. Her eyes light up as she describes Greece's white walls and blue waters or Italy's romantic landscapes. But for now, she's building trust within herself, one solo conversation, one silly joke, and one piece of writing at a time. Her current manifestations include booking a billboard on Sunset Boulevard and eventually leaving L.A. for somewhere with land, animals, and rivers, a place where she can become a mom. "Being rich isn't a goal of mine," she says. "I want a happy family, and I don't think I need to be rich to have that." —**SEAN EVANS**

STYLING BY **RIMA VAIDILA**. MAKEUP BY **HEATHER HARRIS**. HAIR BY **ANASTASIA TEREBOVA**.

What's something people assume about you that's totally wrong?

People tend to assume that I'm a bitch, but I'm actually very sweet and shy.

If your bedroom had a name, what would it be?

Pearly Girlies Pink Barbie Dream House. No boys allowed.

What would we learn about you by going through your trash?

If you went through my trash, you would find a lot of dried-seaweed packages.

What's the most intimate thing someone could do for you that doesn't involve touching?

The most intimate thing someone could do for me without touching would be emotionally just being there and being supportive.

What's something you do only when you're totally alone?

Something I do when I'm totally alone is play *The Sims*. I am a gamer girl at heart.

What part of your personality is your biggest turn-on?

The biggest turn-on about my personality is how silly I am.

What song makes you feel like the hottest person in the room?

"Cherry Pie" by Warrant.

If you could text your younger self one sentence, what would it say?

You're built for the job, kid.

Whom do you become after midnight?

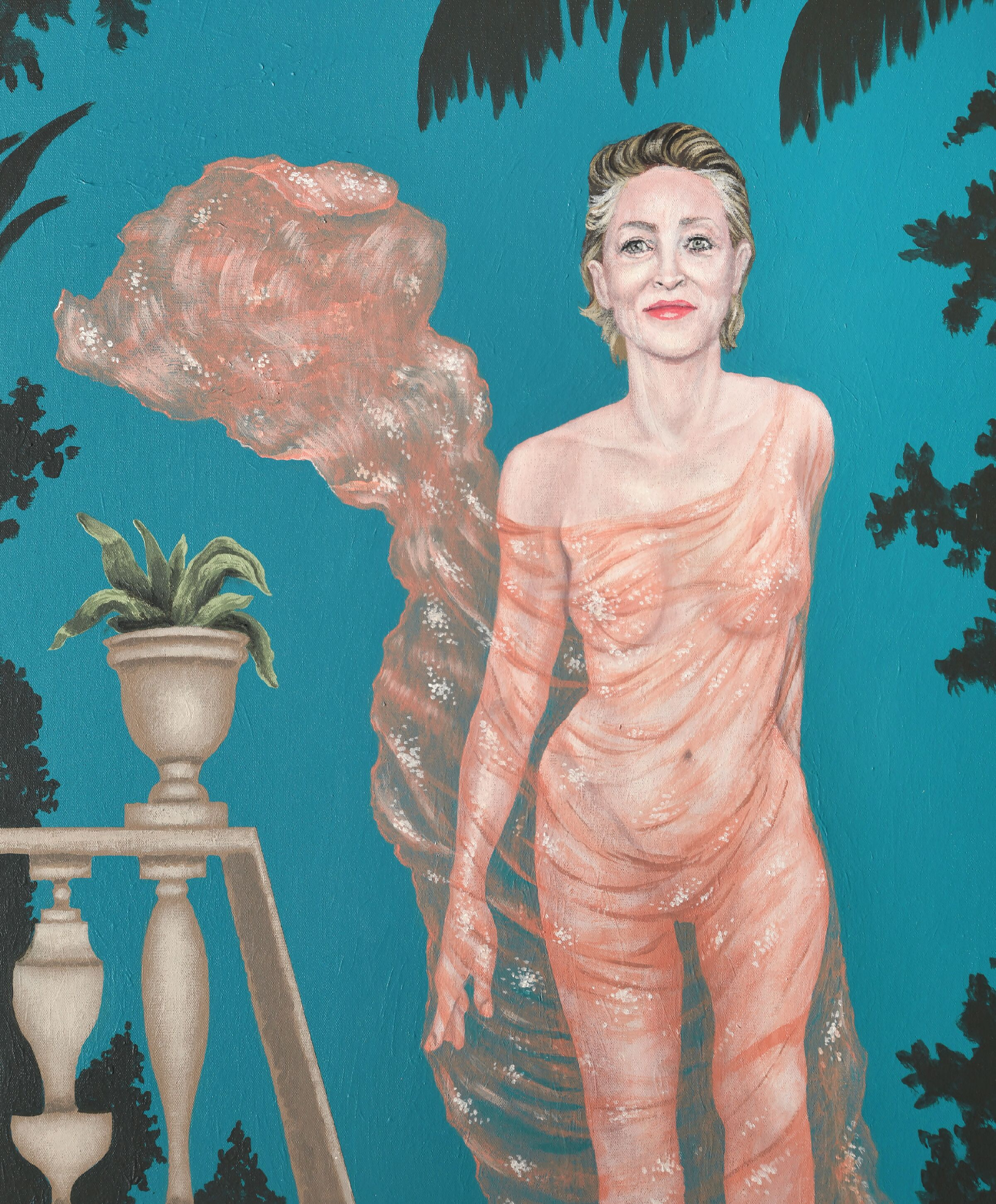
I'm usually sleeping and running from zombies in my dreams.

What are you most passionate about?

I am most passionate about my family, my friends, and my little dog Archie.

What drew you to the *Playboy* world?

I've always loved *Playboy* so much. I used to have it as my background on my phone when I was 15. I would get the little bunnies at the tanning salon.



THE ADVISOR

SHARON STONE

A HOLLYWOOD BADASS ANSWERS YOUR QUESTIONS ON MEN, DATING, REJECTION, AND MORE.

Q: What advice do you have for anyone stepping into a completely new version of themselves, especially later in life?
A: I think of myself as someone who is willing to grow. All of nature grows and changes and develops. So if we're not growing, that must mean we're dying. I work towards being in the flow state. When I find myself in resistance, I have to ask myself, "Why?" And in my case, it's generally because I'm in pain. Physical pain. Or emotional pain. And usually one is causing the other. When it seems really dark and you don't see the light to go to, you follow the shadows. 'Cause the shadows will lead you back to the light.

Q: I saw your last movie, *Nobody 2*, where you play a sadistic, psychotic crime world boss. She doesn't have many positive qualities, but fearlessness is certainly one of them. Do you ever let your dark side come out when people try to stop you from getting what you want?
A: I recommend a different path. You know when you watch TV, you kind of go to the back of your mind, into a more observational place? And when you're with the people with whom you are intensely intimate, you come to the front of your mind. I recommend that when people start to behave inappropriately, you go to that TV-watching place, into the back of your mind. Become more objective. Slow down. Just slow down.

Q: I've been dating a guy who's otherwise perfect for me, but he recently revealed that he voted for Trump. Even worse, I feel like he kept it from me because he was afraid I'd dump him. I don't know what's worse. Is it stupid to let that interfere with what could have been a solid relationship?
A: I think when someone lies to you, you have to find out whether it's because they're ashamed or whether it's because they're a perpetual liar. If it's something that you two can come to terms with, great. Or is he just a fucking dirty dog? Which you can easily figure out pretty quickly, after one real conversation.

Q: My ex and I lived together through the pandemic. She moved out, but we still talk, still sleep together, still agree the world's a mess. We both wonder if there's someone else out there, but neither of us has any desire to get back on the dating apps. Are we taking our time or just wasting it?
A: Everybody wonders if there's somebody else out there. I mean, there's a million people out there, but if you have someone you like being with, *wow*. Sometimes people think that there's another version of themselves out there and that they're going to find it with another person—and that's just a fantasy. Calm down. If you have someone that you can put up with on a day-to-day basis and they can put up with you and you're still sleeping together—eureka. Eureka jack-fucking-pot, baby!

Q: I'm a guy in my late 20s. I've just discovered older women. I'm currently juggling friends-with-benefits situations with three women over 40, one of them married. Now I've pretty much lost interest in women my own age. Is this weird?
A: No, baby, it's not. Young girls are out there looking for a sugar daddy. Why not you? You found people who want to have lots of sex with you and then feed you. What's weird about that?

Q: My boyfriend and I decided it would be hot to have a threesome. He wanted to watch another guy have sex with me, which has also always been a fantasy of mine. We found a really hot guy on a dating app. Things were going really well. Then the guy started kissing my boyfriend, and my boyfriend kissed him back like he was really into it. I know I asked for it, but am I wrong to feel something's wrong here?
A: Let me just talk to you from a logical perspective. When you have two objects and you put a third object in, there's going to be a space between the other two objects. Now, when the space magnetizes in the other direction and you're on the outside, that's something you have to think about. If it creates feelings that are not erotic, as it was apparently erotic for him to observe you, then you're gonna have to discuss that, because maybe observational sexuality is not your turn-on.

Q: I read that you've stopped dating. I'm getting to that point myself, but I'm scared.
A: I think I will still meet someone who will love me and I will love them. But I don't need in the meantime to go on dates and tell near-strangers about my childhood. You know what I mean. And I also don't need to go on three, four, or five dates to see if I'm attracted to someone and they're attracted to me. I don't think of this as giving up. I believe that there is love for everybody. It'll show up. In the meantime, read a book, go for a swim, paint a picture, cultivate a great friendship. Do whatever it is that you want to do, but don't spend desperate time trying to get an idea of a thing. Just live with integrity. It'll show up, whatever it is.

Q: How do you cope with rejection?
A: Rejection hurts. And it makes a lot of guys think women are all bitches because you feel hurt, because they're not going to love you. But other people will. You just have to accept that, or learn to accept that. That's tough. Maybe us people in our 60s can accept that. We've come back a few times, so we know we can come back again. But for the 25-year-old, that's much rougher.

You can also question if you want to keep putting yourself out there. We've been fed this idea that all men are bad. And now a lot of women are like, "You know, maybe they all are." Even men are saying it. Here's the thing. Good men built this country, and now the good men need to stand up and say, "I've had it with this bad bullshit. You're safe around me."

And women, they have the opportunity to say, "You know what? I like men too." I just want it to be equal and fair. We just want to know that the good guys will be good to us, and we can be good to them. You open the car door for me because I'm wearing four-inch heels, for you. I'm not wearing them for me, let me tell you for sure.

PAINTING BY BRUNO LEYDET

2025 PLAYMATE • 2025 PLAYMATE •

Mahina

FOR MISS APRIL **MAHINA FLORENCE**, EVERY DAY AT HOME IN HER NATIVE HAWAII IS A RITUAL.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY **MEGAN BATSON**

“When you get off the plane, the air smells sweet and salty but not fishy. It’s a big hug for your nostrils,” Mahina says, laughing, describing the sensory embrace of returning home to Hawaii. For the 31-year-old Oahu native, that olfactory greeting represents ancestry calling.

Mahina hails from the Mahi ’Ohana, direct descendants of King Kalākaua, who helped shape Hawaii’s kingdom in the 19th century. “It’s cool that our bloodline comes from that,” she says of her roots that stretch back generations across the islands. Growing up on the North Shore in Pūpūkea, she lived within a seven-mile stretch of some of the world’s best beach breaks. Her family was nestled up the mountain, while her husband Nathan’s family resided 15 minutes away, on the coastline below.

That ocean connection shapes her day. Every morning between 7 and 8 a.m., Mahina takes solo beach walks, greeting the same lifeguards who watched her grow up. “It’s most magical when it’s raining,” she says. “The water does ballet on the ocean when it falls.” The ritual continues with jumping in the ocean, then returning to her tiny cottage for elaborate coffee-making involving “an insane coffee machine,” on which she has perfected precisely timed espresso pulls.

Her relationship with Nathan, her partner since they were 18 (after crushing on each other as far back as elementary school), embodies the modern Hawaiian surf life. Together they chase waves globally—he’s a professional surfer—while she documents his career on YouTube.

Mahina credits Nathan for a fundamental mindset shift that’s proving to be indelible. Raised to be “narrow-minded in a good way—work hard, save money, be humble, don’t think outside the box,” she’s learned to approach life less emotionally and be more carefree. “Think like a man, but not in a way that takes your femininity away,” she says, adding Nathan is the person who brings out the best version of herself.

Her contentment is all encompassing. “The lifestyle that I currently have at home in Hawaii, connected to nature, outdoors, surfing, living a healthy lifestyle is perfect,” she says. “My whole goal and dream is to keep doing what I’m doing forever. I don’t feel like I need any more of one thing. I need to be home in Hawaii, around the ocean and my family.”

Mahina’s especially proud of her inclusion in *Playboy* because it means representation for Polynesian people who “aren’t always in the conversation and not always seen.” She says, “I always want to show that our beauty and strength are timeless.” —SEAN EVANS

What part of your personality is your biggest turn-on?

I would say my biggest quality and parts of me that are the biggest turn-on would be my loyalty. I'm extremely loyal to my friends and family and the people I love. It's fierce, it's powerful, it's undeniable, but in all the best ways.

What's something you haven't told your parents?

Hi, Mom and Dad. I am *Playboy*'s April 2025 playmate.

What's the wildest place you've ever changed your clothes?

There is no place too wild for a local girl to change clothes. We can change clothes anywhere. So unless we're on a moving elephant or in a cage with a bunch of death-defying lions, we can change anywhere.

What's the scent that turns you on the most?

The scent that turns me on the most has to be my husband's. It's pungent, it's potent, and it's only a scent that I absolutely love.

Whom do you become after midnight?

After midnight, I become a delusional dreamer. I'm not a delusional thinker in my everyday life. I'm actually very realistic and very straightforward, but something special happens when it becomes nighttime and I'm in bed. I just have all of these, like, positively delusional dreams of all the things that I want to accomplish and all of the things that I want to manifest and my goals that I want to achieve.

What would you text your younger self?

I guess a sentence I would text my younger self would be that there are going to be so many obstacles in life, and the main thing for me is to be able to remember my values, remember where I come from, and try hard to always come back to that and not get very far from it.

What drew you to *Playboy*?

I chose to do *Playboy* because I always put the people that I love, my friends and families, and their dreams forward and ahead of me, which is something that I absolutely love doing, but I feel like this is the first time in my career that I've been able to really choose something for myself. Especially at the age of 31, I've never felt so strong physically, mentally, and spiritually and with where I'm at as a human, I feel like this is also an initiation of me just being a full woman. This is my independent powerful moment for me to make a decision for myself and just to be proud of that. And so I just want to thank *Playboy* for giving me this opportunity and for choosing me and for letting me choose you.

STYLING BY **ELEN DALI**. HAIR AND MAKEUP BY **MARIAH MELANIE**. LEI ART BY **PAMAKANE PICO**.

AMY TAYLO

“I’M PRETTY MUCH AN ATHLETE ON STAGE IN EVERY CAPACITY, BUT I BARELY WARM UP AND I DON’T REALLY WARM DOWN. I DON’T WANT TO SOUND LIKE AN OLD GOAT FOR MY WHOLE LIFE, YOU KNOW, LIKE RFK JR.”

How the Amyl and the Sniffers front woman is making rock ’n’ roll dangerous (and fun) again.

BY DOUGLAS GREENWOOD

R POPS OFF

AMERICAN
DREAM
GIDDY

NOT MUCH HAPPENS IN BALACLAVA, a pleasant-enough suburb of Melbourne, Australia. But every generation or so, the region births a punk band that shakes the firmament. In the mid ’70s, it was Nick Cave and the Birthday Party. In 2016, it was Amy Taylor’s turn. Back then, a gang of friends lived together in a modest apartment, opposite a police station and down the street from a nightclub that never closed. At any given time, you could have found Taylor, the group’s then 20-year-old fateful leader, “fucking around” with friends, going out, and hitting the beach in nearby St. Kilda. They all liked punk music and, less enthralled by legends and more by the scene that surrounded them, figured: “Why don’t we make it ourselves?” So in one single sitting, Taylor—alongside her then flatmates Bryce Wilson, Declan Mehrtens, and Calum Newton—recorded *Giddy Up*, a thrashing EP, and posted it on SoundCloud under their decided stage name. That day, they became Amyl and the Sniffers.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY **BYRON SPENCER**

That fateful moment has birthed a near decade-long career that's seen Balaclava become a dot in the distance for the band. And while there's been some minor change (Newton has since left, replaced by the bassist Gus Romer) and a kind of mainstream embracing (a fiery Gucci campaign), which has likely enraged the stuffy, closed-minded purists, the Sniffers are still tearing apart stages and performing provocative, piss-drunk music to crowds they grab, metaphorically, by the balls. Those crowds are just much bigger now.

"I feel like so much has changed," says Taylor, 29, who meets me on a rainy morning in London. Dressed in a white T-shirt and leather jacket, she's turned up to a demure West London café at peak Sunday brunch hour. She's been living out of a suitcase for the last six months, touring the world. Taylor is in town for a second before taking a long-overdue vacation in Greece. "Remembering when we started, how different I was, and how different we all were—the fact that we're all still friends is kind of crazy," she says.

Taylor wasn't raised in a particularly musical family. As a kid, growing up in a tiny town called Mullumbimby, she barely knew what she wanted to do. "It's almost not fated for me to be here in London," she says. (Last night, in celebration, she watched *Notting Hill*.) "None of my immediate family has been really overseas. The fact that I've even traveled is mind-blowing, you know? It's not like I'm a songbird. We're not making easy music. That it's resonated with so many people and took us this far, especially as an Australian band." She shrugs. "There's all these different things that should have probably kept us back, but it's actually helped us grow."

That defiant turn registers in the band's name: Amyl is short for Taylor's full name, Amy Louise Taylor, and riffs on the real name for poppers, amyl nitrite, a liquid huffed as a muscle relaxant for partyers, predominantly gay men. In the past few years, Amyl and the Sniffers have opened for some of the biggest artists of their genre: Foo Fighters, Green Day, the Offspring. But three albums deep, the band has gathered a big-enough crowd of their own so Taylor's ready for the next step. In November, they'll pull near-arena-size crowds in places like London. "I kind of find it really fun to try and win people over, but we've been doing it for 10 years," she says, her thick accent cutting through the dull café hum. Lately, they've been focusing on their own headline shows and politely declining opening gigs. There's one exception: a spot opening for Australian legends AC/DC this winter. She cried when they got the offer: "They're the best band in the fucking world."

Compromise isn't naturally in the Sniffers' DNA. For years, what they make has been dubbed "pub rock," partly due to the fact that it never ceases to sound like a strange, nail-laced liquid, scooped up from the corner of a bar restroom floor and spat down your throat. It's distasteful, often incendiary, and confrontational. "Jerkin," lifted from the latest album, *Cartoon Darkness*, features the repeated chorus "Jerkin' on your / Squirter, cunt"—which means exactly what you think it does. "People probably assume that I'm drunk and stupid," Taylor says of those who treat her, and the band's music, solely at face value.

If anything, there's a beautiful bait-and-switch in the messy presentation and the poignancy of what the Sniffers use their voice for. When Taylor performs live, she slips into a kind of kinetic tirade ("I love that I can be unhinged in a way where I'm not, like, gonna get arrested"), but they also take that moment to stand up for the disenfranchised. At Coachella earlier this year, between songs, Taylor stood up and pointed out the world's slant toward a new era of fascism and the ignorance of politicians about the genocide in Gaza. Later, at Glastonbury, she used their performance to point out the violence of Australia's colonial history. "When you think about Palestine, you think about the fact that back home in Australia, us whiteys, we're the fucking colonizers," she shouted to roars from the crowd. "That's actually so fucked up and so disgusting."

The Sniffers became one of a number of bands who were fodder for right-wing rags and social media mouthpieces in the festival's aftermath. "If the bitch really believed that[,] she should fuck off back to Europe," one post on X read. "Most politicians, to me, are [leaning] more and more right, and the left is becoming more center," Taylor says. "It's all moving to one side, and I just feel somewhat responsible to do the bare minimum and talk about it." The band is conscious of their crowd: Punk's roots are diverse, and its fan base increasingly more

“I KIND OF FIND IT REALLY FUN TO TRY AND WIN PEOPLE OVER, BUT WE’VE BEEN DOING IT FOR 10 YEARS.”

so. But its big communities thrive in places that are shut off from a wealth of political discourse. “I think it’s [our job] to be able to maybe put a window into that, even if it’s planted the seed, and not try and make other people feel ashamed and not knowing,” she says, taking a sip of her coffee. “I just think it’s so fucking twisted that everyone really is just sucking Netanyahu’s cock.”

Recently, owing to that new wave of success, Taylor is finding fans of the band in strange places. “I was getting my wisdom teeth out, and I was about to go under anesthetic, and the nurse said she was a fan just as I was going to sleep,” she says, laughing. We joke about the punk prospect of her teeth showing up in a museum somewhere or on eBay: “Like, I went to some museum, yeah, and they had a jar of Kylie Minogue’s *shit*,” she says. “Where did they even get that?” We let the question hang in the air.

There’s not much that scares her these days, but a long summer of shows has meant that, on the day we meet, she’s on vocal rest, which is hard for her because she’s a “yapper,” she says: “I’m pretty much an athlete on stage in every capacity, but I barely warm up and I don’t really warm down. I don’t want to sound like an old goat for my whole life, you know, like RFK Jr.” She points a finger to her throat. “I just use these motherfuckers like crazy. I’ve got nodules at the moment, so I have to be careful.” In lieu of cigarettes, she’s chewing on a toothpick.

Later this year, the shows in support of *Cartoon Darkness* will come to an end. Taylor and the band haven’t quite figured out what will come after that. They haven’t started working on whatever’s next. “I always wish we wrote more, but we’re just not that kind of band,” she says. “We write when we write.”

Other bands twist themselves in knots over what to say about what’s going on in the world. Amy Taylor doesn’t hedge. She shouts. That’s punk, in a way: refusing to be polite. Yet Taylor still has a sense of optimism. “There are good people everywhere, and everyone’s just trying their best, actually,” she says. Lately, she’s been thinking about climate change and how, as the world gets hotter, new worlds will be left in the midst of our destruction: “We all die, but maybe there’s a fish at the bottom of the ocean who’s been waiting to come up.” She gives me a toothy, beautiful grin. “Now they can have their turn.”

THIS PAGE: STYLING BY **HARRIET CRAWFORD**. MAKEUP BY **LAUREN WEBSTER**. HAIR BY **SARAH NECIA**. OPPOSITE: PHOTOGRAPH BY **RICHARD GRAY/ALAMY**

BIG SOUND

WE'RE DONE WHISPERING TO LITTLE GRAY ORBS. HI-FI IS BACK—AND IT'S MEANT TO BE SEEN (AND HEARD).

By Jesse Will

INTO THE WOODS

Think of these cans as the Eames lounge chair of headphones: crafted with walnut, built to last, and comfortable enough to disappear. The **Meze 105 Silva** pairs real wood ear cups with a self-adjusting headband and plush velour pads for long listening sessions. The open-back design brings a wide, airy soundstage with a tuning that favors clarity and natural mids over hyped bass. They're ideal for telling your inbox to take a hike and sinking into an album instead.

$499
mezeaudio.com

LOUD AND CLEAR

Hi-fi nerds love to talk about transparency: the idea that your gear should vanish sonically, revealing only what's in the recording. The **Audio-Technica AT-LPA2** turntable takes that literally. A clear acrylic chassis and matching platter keep vibration down (and look cool), while a separate control box keeps interference out of the signal path. Meanwhile, its light, rigid carbon-fiber tonearm tracks record grooves with surgical precision. Yes, it does kinda look like a coke dealer's end table: Consider it a gateway drug to the new world of hi-fi.

$2,000
audio-technica.com

TWO-CHANNEL COMEBACK

Somewhere along the way, mainstream stereo amps lost the plot, bloating into 9.2-channel monsters requiring an interstate's worth of wires running across your living room. You don't want that, nor a snooze-inducing soundbar. What you want is the **Leak Stereo 230**: two big aluminum dials, real walnut side panels, two channels that sound massive (given good speakers), and the right digital smarts (HDMI ARC, Bluetooth, a high-res capable digital-to-analog converter) to future-proof your listening.

$1,995
leakaudio.com

HI-FI HOLY GRAIL

You've seen this brand's amps before (glowing green-and-blue meters, brushed-metal tanks posing as audio gear), usually in someone else's dream setup. The **McIntosh MSA5500** keeps the soul intact but adds modern perks like digital inputs and Bluetooth. Pairing solid-state power (100 watts per channel into 8 ohms; 160 into 4) with networked features and a serious digital-to-analog converter, it's perhaps the most approachable way into the McIntosh cult.

$5,000
mcintoshlabs.com

BAUHAUS WITH A BASS LINE

Self-contained streaming speakers tend to have a tech-bro vibe: Are you an air purifier? Or stereo equipment? Hello? The **Ruark R410**, on the other hand, looks like it came off of a Dieter Rams mood board, blending real wood, brushed metal, and a proper knob. Inside is a cool-running 100-watt Class D amp, twin four-inch woofers, and a pair of tweeters for full stereo separation. It handles Tidal Connect, AirPlay 2, and more, or you can plug in a record player and go analog.

$1,999
ruarkaudio.com

RIFF, NO RAFF

Guitar amps don't usually belong in the living room unless you're going for "college band practice" as a design motif. The **Taylor Circa 74** is different: a midcentury-inspired piece of furniture that just happens to be an acoustic guitar amp. Under the hood, it's a legit 150-watt, 2x12 powerhouse with enough headroom for vocals too. (There's an XLR input for a mic.) And when you're not playing, it doubles as a Bluetooth speaker, meaning you can pivot to karaoke night on the fly.

$1,199
taylorguitars.com

SIZE MATTERS

In an era of disappearing "lifestyle" speakers, the **Wharfedale Super Linton** is unapologetically big—44 pounds a side. Clear some floor space. The three-way design uses a Kevlar woofer for tight bass, a light midrange cone for clarity, and a soft-dome tweeter. The walnut-veneered cabinet is cross-braced to kill resonance, and the stands put the tweeter close to ear level and double as shelves. Cue up an album and you get a wide, warm, precise soundstage that reveals details hiding in your favorite records.

$2,999/pair (with stands)
wharfedaleusa.com

THE LAST LITERARY OUTLAW

Chris Kraus made power games and perversion literary. Her new novel shows that no one's caught up yet. **By Anika Jade Levy**

END
California
RO77ORK

CHRIS KRAUS has been called many things: a genius, an activist, a landlord, a pervert, a prophet, a problem. Her work has the rare quality of being both critically engaged and compulsively fun to read. In certain circles, she's a cult leader for the overeducated and underloved, the academically acceptable face of erotic humiliation.

Kraus, now based in Los Angeles, spent the 1980s in New York directing, acting, and working with artist Louise Bourgeois. Her dramatic training proved crucial to her writing. "When you're working on a character, you find something that comes from an organic impulse and then you push it," she says. "I consciously did that when I was writing. If I thought this is sounding a little crazy, a little pathological, I would say, 'OK. Go there.'"

In 1984, she reconnected with Sylvère Lotringer, a prominent academic she'd had a one-night stand with a few years earlier. Seventeen years her senior, Lotringer taught French and critical theory at Columbia. On the side, he ran Semiotext(e), the cult literary press, reintroducing French theorists, like Gilles Deleuze and Jean Baudrillard, to the American public. By 1990, Kraus had married Lotringer and founded her own imprint, Native Agents, publishing uncategorizable writing by Cookie Mueller, Eileen Myles, Lynne Tillman, and Kathy Acker. By consolidating the most transgressive women in her cohort under the Semiotext(e) banner and appropriating her husband's intellectual reputation, Kraus built a new feminist canon.

Her debut, *I Love Dick*, was published by Native Agents in 1997. Leaning on the label "novel" as both a legal and emotional alibi, the book uses real names and details Kraus's sexual obsession and one-sided correspondence with the sociologist Dick Hebdige. What remains radical about the book is Kraus's willingness to expose her literary double as horny, desperate, and completely out of control. "My goal was to write a funny book," she says, "not to create a flattering self-portrait."

Reportedly selling a few hundred copies in its first year, *Dick* languished until Semiotext(e) reissued it nearly a decade later with an introduction by Myles. The era of autofiction was underway, and the book caught fire. The 2006 reissue was a commercial hit, adored by millennial readers and written up by the major press.

That same year, Kraus published *Torpor*, a quieter, more formally restrained novel, and she met the man who would become her second husband, Philip Valdez. Valdez was a recovering addict fresh out of prison, and Kraus hired him to manage an apartment building. Kraus had been making her money piecemeal, moonlighting as an adjunct academic, writing art criticism, and renting out a rotating collection of properties that she and Lotringer had acquired with his modest inheritance.

Since the material of her daily life is also the material of her work (Kraus admits she has "very little imagination"), she has written about owning and managing properties for as long as she's been involved in the venture. In her latest novel, *The Four Spent the Day Together*, she frames this approach as almost political: "[to] make a small profit without raising rents or displacing people." When asked whether she considers her writing to be a form of activism, she doesn't hesitate: "Yes. Of course."

With *Torpor*, Kraus began writing in the third person. "I needed to make fun of them," she says of her characters. "I needed to turn them into little puppets and knock them around. And if I did that in the first person, people would say once again, as they did with *I Love Dick*: 'She has such poor self-esteem. She's so abject. What's wrong with her?'"

In 2017, #MeToo reached its fever pitch and Kraus's career took another turn: cancellation. By then, even the military-industrial complex had reified the language of social justice: Companies like Lockheed Martin publicized their attempts to cleanse themselves of the "roots of white male culture." Concurrently, Kraus spoke out in defense of NYU professor Avital Ronell, then 65, who was being sued by a 34-year-old graduate student over claims of sexual harassment. Fifty-one prominent academics signed a letter in her defense. Kraus joined the voices echoing across the internet and drafted her own statement: "[The plaintiff]—or any Ph.D. student at NYU—is hardly an innocent," she wrote in a blog post that has since vanished.

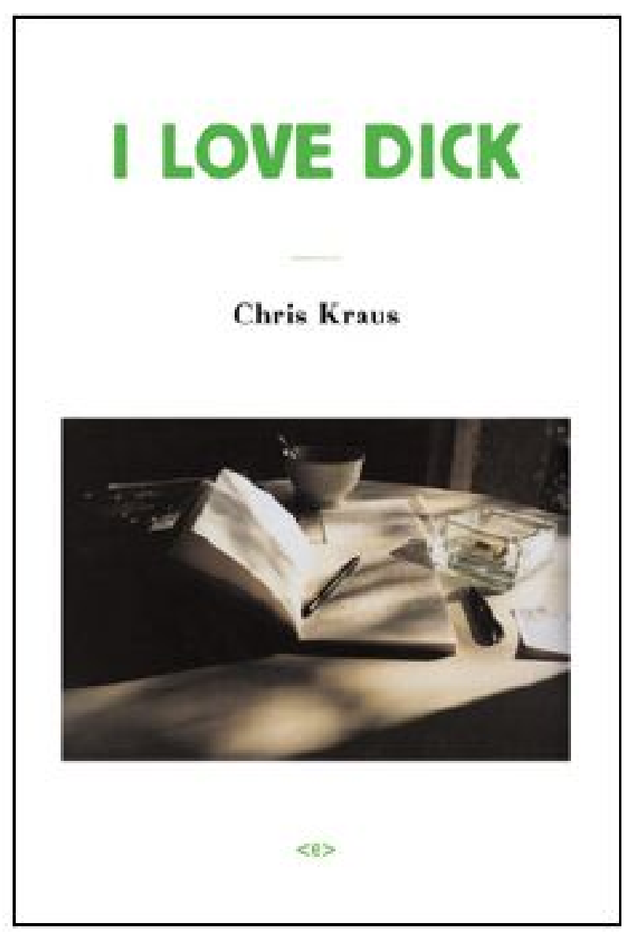
By defending Ronell, Kraus rejected the simplicity of #MeToo. A millennial tastemaker mocked her on Twitter: "Chris Kraus isn't an artist. She's a landlord." Others piled on, denigrating not just her politics but also her writing, her looks, her existence. Many of these primary texts make it into Kraus's new novel, including one post that asserts she "makes these ventures as part of the metatext of all her self-serving so-called confessional writing." Metabolizing this criticism into her fiction is trademark Chris Kraus: confirming her critics' worst indictments while thinking circles around them.

This raises the question: Is Kraus's project an attempt to exonerate herself from the choices she's made, or is it a self-lacerating moral inventory? The answer is: It doesn't matter. The contradictions are the point. Now that she is 70, the cancellation is just another line on her CV.

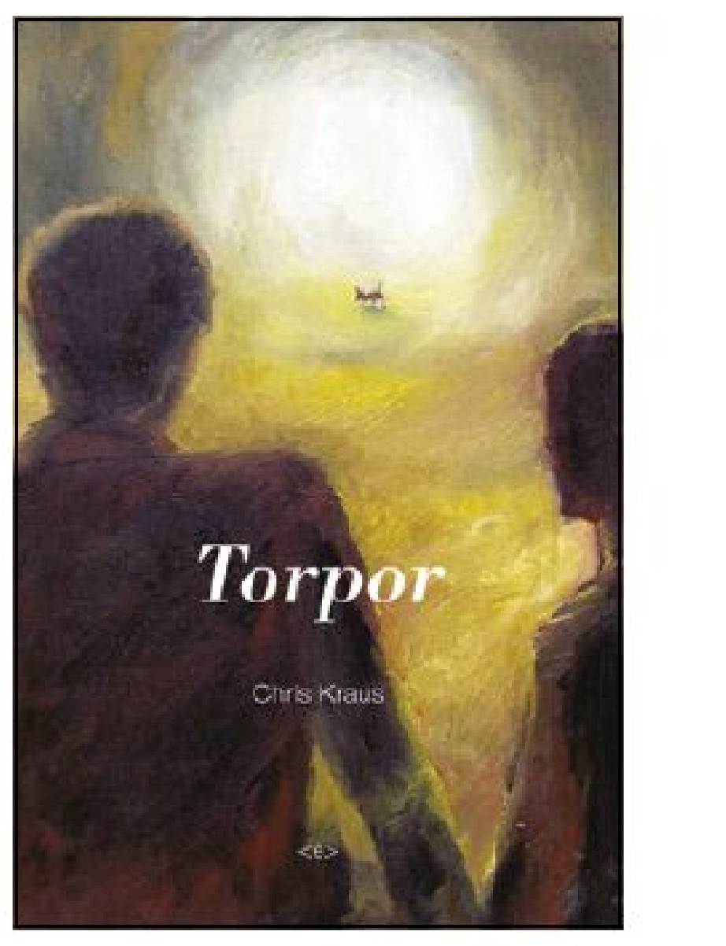
In *The Four Spent the Day Together*, Kraus is reborn as Catt Greene. The age and class dynamics of her first marriage are reversed: Her husband is a decade younger, financially dependent, overlooked at parties, and legible only through her. This novel is her most complete and unsettling achievement. After a lifetime of playing the ingenue, Kraus has assumed her final form: white male genius.

THIS PAGE, FROM TOP: SEMIOTEXT(E) (2); SIMON & SCHUSTER (2); PENGUIN RANDOM HOUSE; HACHETTE BOOK GROUP. OPPOSITE: MAX FARAGO/TRUNK ARCHIVE.

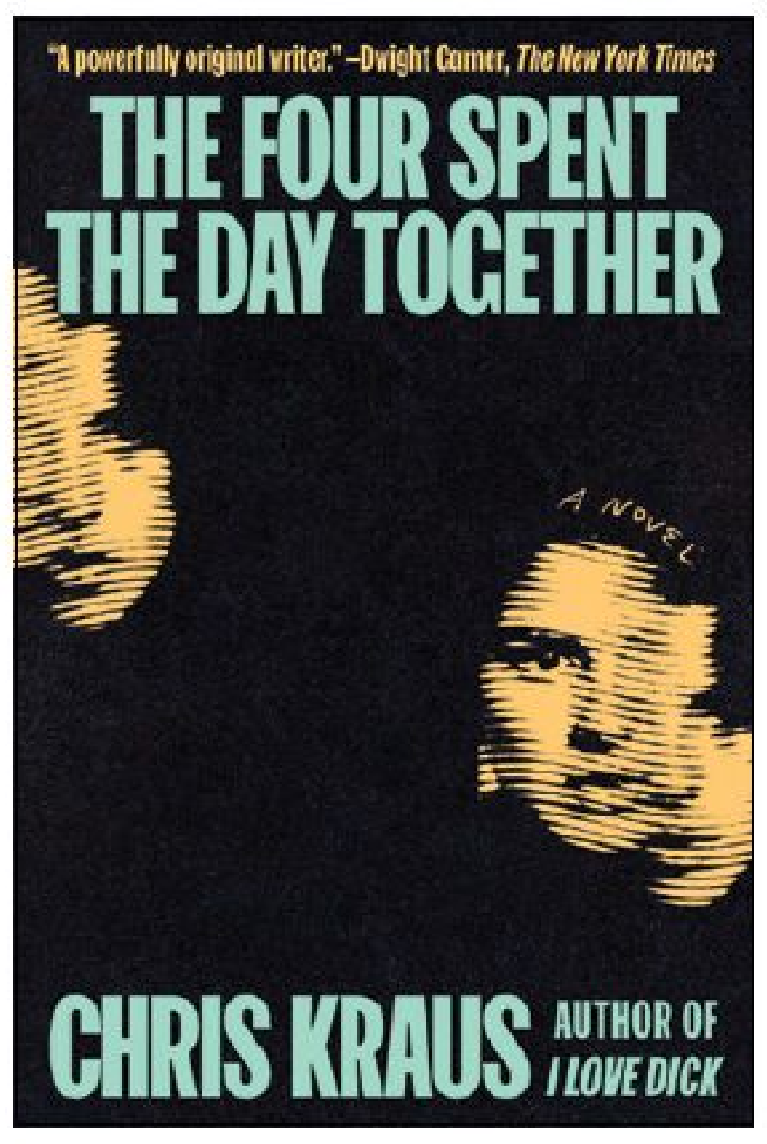
HORNY, BRILLIANT, OUT OF CONTROL
A CHRIS KRAUS PRIMER



***I Love Dick* (1997)**
Chris, a 39-year-old video artist, is overlooked in both marriage and career. A single encounter with sociologist Dick Hebdige sparks an obsession that dominates her existence. The book is an ecstatic act of humiliation: Kraus casts Hebdige as muse and claims the role of unruly, perverted genius for herself. She inverts the traditional gender dynamics of literary obsession and emerges as a fully formed artist. Dismissed by Hebdige as "a criticism of my presence on Earth," *Dick* would eventually be credited as a template for the mainstream novel (and a 2017 Amazon series starring Kathryn Hahn and Kevin Bacon).



***Torpor* (2006)**
A spiritual prequel to *Dick*, *Torpor* follows Sylvie and Jerome—stand-ins for Kraus and her first husband, Sylvère Lotringer—as their marriage unravels in the early '90s. The cheap, bohemian New York of her youth has vanished. "There is no longer any way of being poor in any interesting way in major cities like Manhattan," she writes, as the couple flees upstate. Sylvie wants a baby and nearly persuades Jerome to adopt a Romanian orphan, but she realizes he's only interested in road-tripping through a collapsing Soviet Union. Tender, imaginative, and formally ambitious, *Torpor* broadened Kraus's reputation beyond the erotic provocation of *Dick*.


"A powerfully original writer." —Dwight Garner, The New York Times
THE FOUR SPENT THE DAY TOGETHER
A NOVEL
CHRIS KRAUS
AUTHOR OF I LOVE DICK

***The Four Spent the Day Together* (2025)**
Kraus's latest is structured as a triptych. "Milford" is her long-delayed family story: Jasper and Emma echo her parents, and Catt stands in for Kraus herself—precocious but bent toward self-destruction. "That's usually the first book people write," Kraus says. "I had to wait all these years because so long as my parents were alive, I knew I couldn't do it." In "Balsam," Catt reappears as an adult writer and partner to a recovering addict. "Harding" turns outward, tracing the lives of Minnesota teens convicted of a motiveless murder. Kraus admits she saw herself in their ringleader: "She was a smart girl with nowhere to put it. She fell into meth when she was 14 years old. That could have been me."

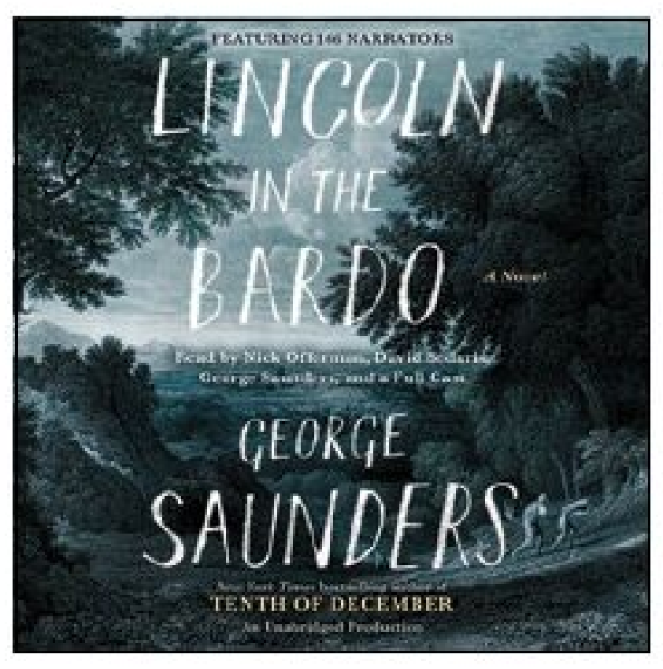
……

BETTER HEARD THAN READ

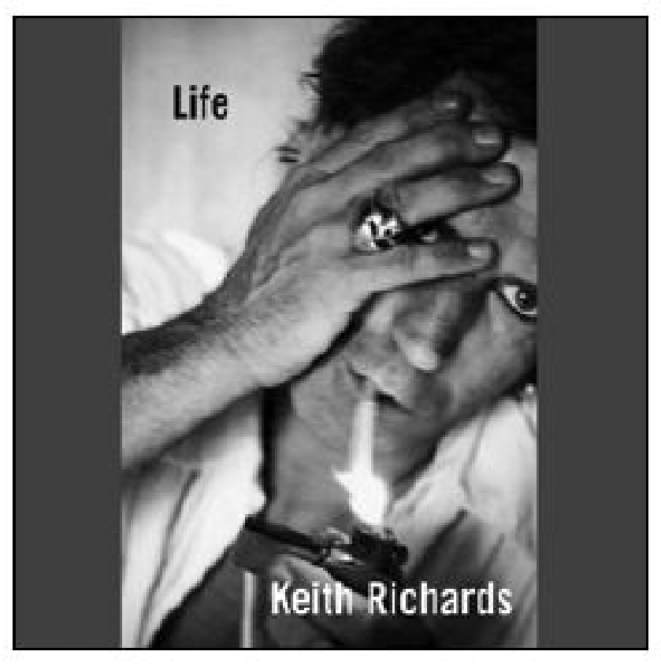
The *Playboy* staff's tiny audiobook hall of fame.

READ BY THE AUTHOR

***Down the Drain*, by Julia Fox**
The only appropriate way to consume Fox's tales of stardom, drug abuse, and her time as a dominatrix is through the ASMR of her ever-so-subtle lisp. Fox's recollection of loss, New York City, and horrible men is even more intimate through her gentle vocal fry. I still don't know what to make of her, but this audiobook offers the rare impression that I might understand her. —*Magdalene Taylor*



***Lincoln in the Bardo*, George Saunders**
I cracked this in print twice over the years—both times it died on my nightstand. Then I played the audiobook and found myself on the interstate outside Waco, Texas, in tears. Saunders stages Abraham Lincoln's grief in a graveyard purgatory where ghosts bicker, fart, and deny they're dead. An absurd 166 voices chime in, from Nick Offerman to Jeff Tweedy. The production leans earnest but still flattens you. —*Jesse Will*



***Life*, by Keith Richards with James Fox**
It's not new, but it might be the only rock memoir that matters. Written with savagery and self-effacing humor, these stories belong on popular music's cave walls. Sometimes Richards acknowledges his horrid behavior; sometimes he seems unaware of how monstrous he was. Irish songwriter Joe Hurley teases every smoked-out syllable from the page, perfectly evoking one of music's most depraved, redemptive journeys. —*Mike Guy*

2025 PLAYMATE • 2025 PLAYMATE •

FOR MISS MAY **NOÉMIE NEUENS,**

Noémie

CHASING SUMMER IS A YEAR-ROUND PURSUIT.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY **ANA DIAS**

“I’m always chasing summer,” Noémie says with a smile that suggests she’s routinely catching it. The 24-year-old Luxembourg native splits her time between Cape Town, South Africa, and beachy European hot spots. “When winter hits in Barcelona, where I am now, I go to Cape Town,” she says. “I went there four years ago and fell in love with Table Mountain and everything between there and the ocean.”

Noémie has built her modeling career around this rhythm of seasonal migration. But her key to happiness runs deeper than nomadic wandering. “I have ADHD, so I get small dopamine hits from random things, like ticking off my to-do list,” she says. “But overall, I don’t think a single thing should bring me joy. I need to wake up every day grateful for my life, my health, and my opportunities.”

She arrived at this mindset following profound loss. Six and a half years ago, her older brother, her only sibling, passed away. The experience transformed how she views both life and mental health. “Something dramatic happens and can pull you down very far, but you can choose to look at things differently,” she reflects. “You can choose to stand up or stay in that sad spiral.” Now she makes it her mission to encourage others to speak up about their struggles and process their emotions.

Traveling with Marlowe, her small Pomeranian, Noémie defied everyone who said getting a dog would complicate her global lifestyle. “Waking up with a dog in your bed? Always good. Having a bad day? Cuddle your dog,” she says, laughing. The well-trained pup—“He’s not a normal small dog. I trained him to not bark at everything”—accompanies her across continents, adding joy to every destination.

Her brutal candor often surprises people who assume women with beauty must be fake or mean. “I’m very honest. When I think of something, I say it,” Noémie explains. “I think harsh truths break bubbles and move you further in the direction you’re supposed to go.” This directness extends to her six-year relationship, as she recently told her boyfriend he needed to work on his emotional side—or she’d leave. “Surprisingly, it was well received. He realized it was something he needed to work on.”

For someone who photographs tall, Noémie stands at just five feet, five inches, but her presence fills any room. Her best friend, Lily, brings out her energy with bubbly conversation and genuine listening, while quiet tropical beaches, not crowded Barcelona shores, provide her with the best rejuvenation.

“A successful life is one you live happily, no matter how much you have,” Noémie says. “Everything you’re looking for is already here. You are all you need.” It’s a mentality born from loss, refined by wanderlust, and practiced daily under whatever sun she can find. —SEAN EVANS

What's something people assume about you that's totally wrong?

Probably my height, because I'm actually 1.67 meters, and most people think that I'm much taller because I photograph really tall when I model. So, yeah, I get that very often.

What drew you to the *Playboy* world—not just the title, but the experience?

Honestly, I've known *Playboy* since I was very young, which is kind of crazy if you think about it. But when I got the inquiry about the *Playboy* shoot, I was honestly just superstoked to be part of a project this big and this cool and be a part of a team that's this creative, just such a cool opportunity that I'm really happy to take and happy to be part of.

What part of yourself were you hoping people would see when you became a Playmate?

I would say my passion. Whenever I take part in any project, I try to bring most of myself and my passion to the project and just do my best. I think people could take part in that and see me as much more than just the photos that are taken of me.

What's the most rebellious thing you've ever worn—or not worn?

On a daily basis I don't wear a bra, but I don't think that's rebellious at all. I think society could, you know, change that a little bit and not push girls to wear bras, something that's very uncomfortable. I haven't worn a bra in, like, six years now and no regrets.

What's the most intimate thing someone could do for you that doesn't involve touching?

Probably when someone remembers something that I said, like, a few weeks ago, a few months ago, or, like, a few years ago and they bring it up in a random moment just makes me feel very special that they remember something so small. Or when they are someplace in the world and then they send me a photo of something that reminded them of me. It's just very, very sweet and wholesome, and I think that that's a kind of love that I really appreciate.

If your mood right now were a piece of lingerie, describe it.

Honestly, probably some very comfortable cotton white boxers and no bra, but if I had to say something more on a sexier side, I would say a lace dress, just very comfortable and nice on the skin.

What part of your personality is your biggest turn-on?

Probably my willpower. Whenever I put my head to something, I'll do it, and it can be something as crazy as doing a parasite cleanse where you cannot eat the foods that you've always eaten before and you just do it. Or a photo shoot like this one is kind of crazy to me because I had never done a nude photo shoot, but I thought, "Why not?" So here I am and doing it.

What song makes you feel like the hottest person in the room?

"Not like Paris" by Baby Rouge. You'd have to play it to understand what I mean. The bass line, the sound, the voice—it's perfect. Some French, some English. It's just really good. I love it.

If you could text your younger self one sentence, what would it say?

Tell the people you love that you love them because you don't know how long you'll have them. That's just a really important one.

Whom do you become after midnight?

I'm a sleepyhead. I will be asleep pretty much 99 percent of the time after midnight, but then there's that 1 percent of me that loves to dance. I will only party when the music is really good. I will not go out to drink or to do anything else. I'll go to dance.

What are you most passionate about?

Living a happy life. I feel like everyone else should do exactly the same. Do what fulfills your heart because at the end of the day, that's all you have. You can have the simplest life and have a happy life and have a much better life than someone else who makes so much money, so I think that's the most important for me.

HAIR AND MAKEUP BY CARLA TKACHOV AND RAQUEL BATALHA

KID CUDI WEARS
LGN Louis Gabriel Nouchi jacket and pants. Christian Louboutin boots.

THE INTERVIEW

KID CUDI

BY **JAYSON BUFORD**

PHOTOGRAPHS BY **MASON POOLE**

STYLING BY **JASON REMBERT**

Kid Cudi poses in front of three cameras in a Culver City studio. As he stands against a wall as wide and bright as an IMAX screen, his shadow hovers around him, protecting him almost, a shield for an artist who is one of the more feverishly intense rappers alternative hip-hop has ever known. Photo shoots can feel awkward, the subject frozen while the shutters click. Unprompted, Cudi defies the static scene by pointing an imaginary gun at the camera like Tom Cruise in *Collateral*, moving with an assassin's grace. His long LGN coat falls like a cape, his salmon Saint Laurent shirt crisp underneath as his shadow dances with him while he twists.

Improvisation has always been Cudi's way, though. It's the same instinct that carried him from 2008's "Day 'n' Nite" and his legendary work on Kanye's *808s & Heartbreak* into the stratosphere, recalibrating rap and inspiring everyone from Travis Scott to emo-rap champions like Lil Peep. On record, he's been dancing with shadows for years, starting with *Man on the Moon* and its sequel, then *Indicud*, albums that stretched beyond hip-hop's usual sonics while holding onto a raw emotional core. His songs are lifelines for fans who see themselves in his well-documented battles with depression, addiction, and anxiety. Cudi's place in hip-hop is secure because few rappers have been as willing to peel themselves open like a bullet wound—raw, there for anyone to judge or connect with.

His versatility has only continued as he has gotten older. From 2010 to 2011, he starred in the HBO show *How to Make It in America*, short-lived but still beloved for its tales of hustle. He created *Entergalactic*, a television special, and the underrated R&B album that went with it. In July of this year, he had a role in *Happy Gilmore 2* as the FBI agent who, memorably, takes down Ben Stiller's character, Hal, a sadistic nursing home orderly.

Now 41, Cudi—born Scott Ramon Seguro Mescudi—seems to be moving in clean air: ambitious and oddly at peace. He's been looking inward this year, seeing himself for the first time as a fully fleshed, healthy man capable of a consistent life with love that fulfills and balances him. He's comfortable enough to admit that his current bliss has him looking at the past. Just this June, Cudi did what so many men do after they hit a certain age where the demons finally relent: He got married. The tension that defined his earlier life made the journey to finding his partner, Lola Abecassis Sartore, all the more rewarding. They met at a Louis Vuitton fashion show when she was working under Virgil Abloh. Cudi walked the runway, Lola worked backstage, and sparks flew.

It's a testament to his new tranquility that Cudi can sit down for this interview at all. He's been painting while starring in films and making *Free*, his recent pop album. In January, his artwork will be exhibited in Paris. The man on

THIS PAGE Advisry jacket and pants. Saint Laurent shirt. Christian Louboutin boots.

the moon is now grounded but still ambitious, reflective yet in the moment. *Playboy* sat down with him to talk about marriage, movies, and what's next.

PLAYBOY: You've wrestled with inner turmoil before. What helps you clear your head and enjoy life now?

CUDI: I paint a lot, and that's been this new blessing for me. Being alone was always a problem, but now I enjoy my privacy. I'm just in my own little world for hours. It's such a beautiful experience for me. I never had that outlet before. Music is another way of me creating, but it's different.... There's a lot of thinking that goes into making a song: what you're going to talk about, the hook and the music, the beat. But with painting, I just kind of visualize in my mind what I want...[and] the voice of my head is not thinking about shit.

PLAYBOY: What do you gain by exploring so many forms of art?

CUDI: For me, every time I accomplish a new goal or learn something new, I'm like, "What else can I do?" It pushes me to see what else is out there in the world.... It's an exciting thing when you tap into that creative part of your mind. You can go in there and take something out, make it out of thin air, and put it in the world.... Whether it's making a song, painting, designing clothes, there's something really magical about being able to do that. I have joy as if I'm a younger version of myself.... I still got the childlike excitement in me, the curiosity. At 41, I still have the genuine curiosity of an 11-year-old. You know, I have my life partner; my daughter is about to be 16.... My family's good; my friends are good.... Dot da Genius and I have been friends for 20 years—the guy I came into this business with and produced "Day 'n' Nite" with.

PLAYBOY: Yeah, you are married now. Why was it time to make this journey?

CUDI: I've always been on it, but I've been fucking with some duds. [There was] one girl I could have possibly been like that with, but I was young... in my 20s. This is something I always wanted, and I know that I'm at a place where I'm happy with my life, happy with myself. I love myself and just knew I was ready to commit and be there for someone in the best ways. I didn't think twice. I got the ring and made the leap and—

PLAYBOY: May I ask where you proposed?

CUDI: Kyoto, Japan, at a temple.

PLAYBOY: Is that significant to both of you?

CUDI: Yeah, it's one of her favorite places, and I had never been. She obviously had no idea. We had this tour of these temples, and there was this one we rented out—it was just me and her. We walked around the garden, and I proposed right there. It was beautiful. After that, we stayed in the temple. They brought desserts, Champagne. It was just a beautiful experience. It's wild. I'm sure my friends can't believe that I am married.

"I STILL GOT THE CHILDLIKE EXCITEMENT IN ME. AT 41, I HAVE THE GENUINE CURIOSITY OF AN 11-YEAR-OLD."

"I THINK THERE'S A REALNESS ABOUT ME THAT PEOPLE JUST KNOW AND CAN GET OFF THE BAT. I THINK THAT'S WHAT HIP-HOP IS SUPPOSED TO BE ABOUT."

PLAYBOY: I see you blushing and smiling. We look at marriage as this idea that your life is closing. But for you, you have seemed to gain freedom from it.

CUDI: It's such a cool feeling. I called my wife a bit ago asking her about this restaurant that we visited in Paris. Anyway, I call her, and I just hear "Hello, baby" and I feel the joy radiating from the phone. We've been talking about having kids—that's the next chapter. I've wanted to have more for years, give my daughter siblings.... She can be a big sister and babysit. And she probably won't want to, but don't worry, I will make her. But, man, it's just the endless possibilities: more kids, watching them get old, retiring together, living on a farm. [My wife] loves animals—mini donkeys, mini goats, little piglets. The future looks bright, and I'm excited to grow old with this woman. I really am.

PLAYBOY: You both are into fashion. Competing is the wrong word, but what's it like seeing her style and her seeing your style?

CUDI: Yeah, we are not competing. She is a master at her craft. Yeah, she's incredible, and she just guides me and gives me advice. She's a champion for it—she loves what I did with MOTR *[Members of the Rage, his fashion line]*. She loves what I do with WZRD *[his musical project with Dot da Genius]*. I'm just so lucky. At any given moment, I could call her and ask her a question about my clothing line, or I can have her come through and help me design something. She'll be right there, and she'll make the illest shit. For my last tour, she designed the outfit that I wore. It's priceless.

PLAYBOY: One of the things I associate with you, especially in terms of music, is that blackness is so dynamic. It's so eclectic. So I'm always wondering, how have you been able to stay relevant? In terms of the streets, hip-hop culture in general, while also being yourself, while also being free?

CUDI: I think there's a realness about me that people just know and just can get off the bat. I think that's what hip-hop is supposed to be about. It's realness. You don't get a lot of realness.

PLAYBOY: It could be you. It could be Wayne. It could be E-40 or 03 Greedo.

CUDI: What's the through line?

“THAT’S WHY MY SHIT WORKED, BECAUSE I DIDN’T SWITCH THE CODE OF HIP-HOP. I KEPT THE CORE ROOT OF IT, WHICH WAS REALNESS.”

Realness. And that’s why my shit worked, because I didn’t switch the code of hip-hop. I kept the core root of it, which was realness, and just put my version of that out sonically, and it still resonated. It was some real shit. That’s how you stay in tune with hip-hop.

PLAYBOY: What movies have you been watching?

CUDI: Recently? I actually joined Letterboxd.

PLAYBOY: Oh yeah, I saw you gave *Sinners* five stars.

CUDI: Yeah, I saw *The Long Walk* last night. It was fucking incredible. JT Mollner, who wrote the script, he’s a homie. We just became cool several months ago. I did a screening for his movie *Strange Darling*. We connected through that, and we touched base here and there.

PLAYBOY: What do you like about the medium of film?

CUDI: I like the endless possibilities. The same way I like music. Music is endless possibilities. I can make music until I’m out of this bitch. I can make movies until I am out of this bitch. It’s the endless possibilities, the wondrous worlds we can go to that excite me about film the most. I write my own stories and develop my own scripts. I love it, just sitting at home outlining ideas. I have this thirst to direct. I directed music videos before, throughout my career, and it was not that I felt that it was one step closer to accomplishing my dream to direct a feature—it was great because it allowed me to put myself in this uncomfortable position, dealing with a crew, being pretty much the king of the court. I have to guide people to help me get my vision out, and that’s why doing all those videos early on was really important. So when it came time to do this short film that I did for “Mr. Miracle,” we were a well-oiled machine. I want to continue to tell more unique stories that we don’t really see anymore.

PLAYBOY: What are unique stories we don’t see?

CUDI: I think there’s a lot of stories that we just don’t see from a Black perspective. When I approach it, I’m like, “Man,

THIS PAGE Denzil Patrick shirt. **OPPOSITE** K.ngsley shirt. ROUGH. pants. Christian Louboutin boots.

THIS PAGE Advisry shirt. Entire Studios shorts. Boots, stylist's own. **OPPOSITE** LGN Louis Gabriel Nouchi jacket and pants. Christian Louboutin boots.

GROOMER BRIELLE McKENNA
BARBER SY THE BARBER

what's the role y'all would give Ryan Gosling?" I want to do that. "What y'all gonna give, Leonardo DiCaprio?" I want that. I feel like I just want to keep pushing as an actor, as a director. If I need to act and direct my own shit, so be it. We have to see more. I don't like to sit around and wait. I don't trust that the people in power know what time it is. I don't know if I have to make my own studio like Tyler Perry did. I just really want to create stuff that you don't get a chance to see. I think there's a lane for that. Like, we never really get a chance to see Black vampires. That's why Sinners is a smash. It's right there: Like, oh man, he *[writer, producer, and director Ryan Coogler]* is right. It was genius, and it was an original film, and it was different. And that lets the industry know that original ideas can work. I'm saying we're getting old. Guys in my generation are now the ones running studios. So we have a chance to decide what is cool to the younger generation.

PLAYBOY: *Happy Gilmore* came out when you were 13.

CUDI: No, like—

PLAYBOY: My bad, didn't mean to age you up.

CUDI: I just texted Adam [Sandler] the other day. I saw on my feed, Adam and Ben Stiller doing the scene in the hospital when he drops off his grandma in [the original] *Happy Gilmore*. They were laughing. They couldn't get through the take. They knew that shit was funny. I texted him. It's so crazy, so wild, that I'm the guy that took down Hal *[Stiller's recurring character]*. Eleven-year-old Scott would never believe that.

"I THINK THERE'S A LOT OF STORIES THAT WE DON'T SEE FROM A BLACK PERSPECTIVE.... I JUST REALLY WANT TO CREATE STUFF THAT YOU DON'T GET A CHANCE TO SEE."

"I DON'T LIKE TO SIT AROUND AND WAIT. I DON'T TRUST THAT THE PEOPLE IN POWER KNOW WHAT TIME IT IS."

PLAYBOY: How do you stay in the moment when you are on set with Sandler and Stiller?

CUDI: It felt like I was watching a movie at home, not realizing, "Holy shit, you have lines. Say your lines, motherfucker!" It was because I was watching Ben Stiller's performance—it was funny as fuck. I wonder if I almost ruined the take because I was laughing so hard. Adam's the sweetest. Ben too. And I am so mad because I hadn't seen *Severance* before [shooting with Stiller]. Then I saw it, and I was like, "Man, I could have been on set asking him so many *Severance* questions."... But I fucking blew it.

PLAYBOY: What's next for you? We know you got the show in Paris coming up. How excited are you for the next step?

CUDI: More movies, more things that I develop.

PLAYBOY: Can you share these developments?

CUDI: Not quite yet.... OK, one thing: There's this animated feature that this young man, Jeron Braxton, created called *Slime* that I'm doing next year. The cast just got announced—John Boyega, Willow Smith—and I'm scoring it as well. That's my next venture into animation.

PLAYBOY: Last one... What advice would you give yourself at age 24, when *Man on the Moon* came out?

CUDI: When you think you don't know, you know. You know.

JE T'AIME, JANE

IN NOVEMBER 1970, JANE BIRKIN FIRST APPEARED IN *PLAYBOY*.
DECADES LATER, WE'RE STILL CAPTIVATED.

BY MARISA MELTZER | PHOTOGRAPHS BY POMPEO POSAR

IN THE SUMMER OF 1970, Jane Birkin wrote in her diary: "I did *Playboy* yesterday, which was something. I did get what I wanted, which was my choice of photos and more than three pages, so we did it my way." She sure did. Jane Birkin was beautiful, but even more than that, she was memorable.

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In her photos, her lips are full and pouty. There's a gap between her two front teeth, which gives her face a bit of asymmetry. With freckles across the bridge of her nose, she looks like she had spent the summer in the sun. Then there is the hair. Light brown, straight, a few layers for movement, cascading past her shoulders. And the most important part: long bangs that grazed her eyebrows, emphasizing big, expressive greenish-blue eyes. She was not a bodacious babe but rather a natural, willowy gamine type with small but perfectly shaped breasts.

The moody photos were captured when Birkin was at the height of being an It girl as a posh 23-year-old London-born actress who had moved to Paris at 21 for a role opposite the French troubadour Serge Gainsbourg. The two almost immediately fell in love and engaged in one of the most legendary and publicly horny relationships of the 20th century. After being teased for her body at boarding school, feeling less pretty than her actress mother, and being cheated on by her ex, she felt beautiful, even erotic now that she was with Gainsbourg.

They were in the midst of promoting their sexual innuendo–filled song "Je t'aime… Moi non plus" (which means "I love you… Me neither"). The song was slow and talky, unfolding like two lovers whispering to each other in bed. There were references to thrusting, coming and going, and carnality during Gainsbourg's part of the duet, while Birkin's singing was composed of moaning. As she cooed "I love you, I love you, oh God, I love you" in the song's crescendo, Gainsbourg took special attention to conduct the "oh God, I love you" part as if it was an orchestra of moans and even told Birkin to cool off on the heavy breathing at one point, that it was a little too much. Birkin's vocals were recorded in such an authentically orgasmic way that rumors would later abound that they were literally having sex while recording the song. Birkin thought that rumor was funny, albeit incorrect. She never shied away from scandal. When the song came out in February 1969, it was immediately a hit. "Erotic Record Shunned," wrote a British tabloid.

For Birkin, the sexy song, just like taking photos for *Playboy*, was an expression of her own comfort. Birkin and Gainsbourg took to egging each other on in a game of sensual one-upmanship as she came into a newfound confidence in her sexuality. He loved to ask Birkin, "What have you never done?" Birkin asked Gainsbourg to take her to a sex hotel. Her fantasy was to go to the most sordid and decrepit one that they could find in Paris and ask for a room for her to play-act as a sex worker. They went to drag clubs, and she once bought him an inflatable sex doll that was so badly made, they ended up doubling over in laughter and hiding it under the bed.

Their bedroom on the Left Bank in Paris looked like the kind of place where nothing wholesome had ever happened. The windows: covered in blackout curtains. The walls:

JANE BIRKIN

FROM THE ARCHIVES, 1970

JANE BIRKIN

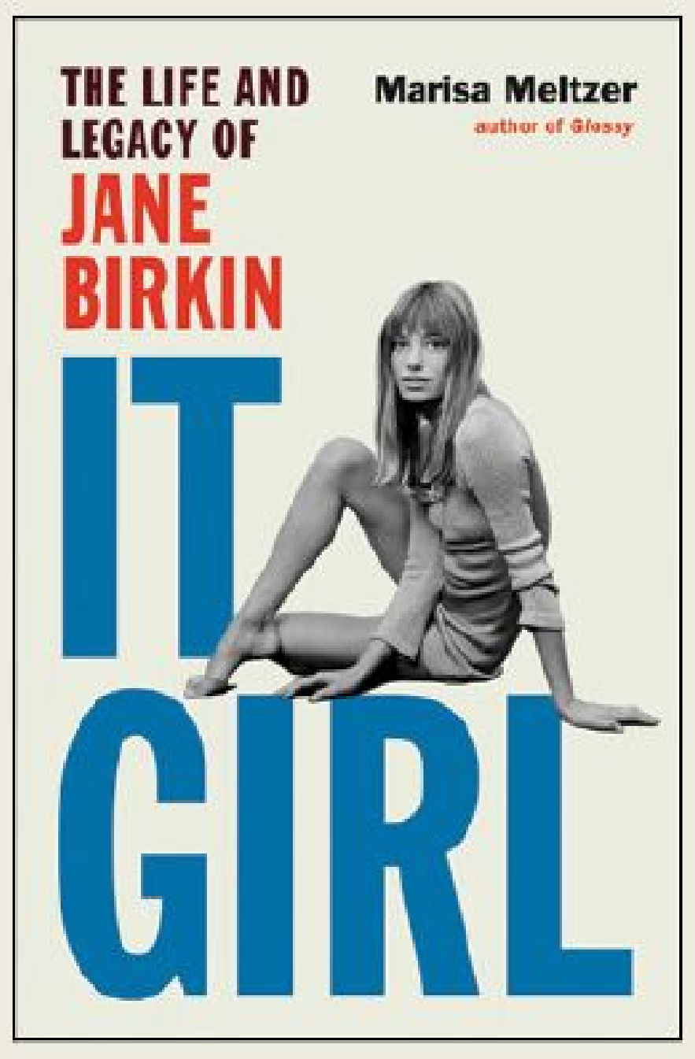
FROM THE ARCHIVES, 1970

black. The bed: gigantic. The coverlet: made of black mink. At the foot of the bed was a bench in the shape of a mermaid. It was in that shadowy apartment that Pompeo Posar shot Birkin's *Playboy* photos.

It was not the last time she appeared in *Playboy*, posing again in the Italian and French editions in 1976 and 1982. Birkin didn't necessarily differentiate what she did for erotic magazines marketed toward men from posing in women's fashion magazines, like *Elle*, where she also posed nude, albeit naughty bits strategically hidden. In interviews, she repeated that she thought posing naked or nearly naked was normal and something most actresses did. "I don't find naked girls indecent, nor the gentlemen," she once told an interviewer. She compared it to going to the Musée Rodin and enjoying looking at the sculptures' buttocks. She appeared in the French magazine *Lui* ("of the modern man"), where she was photographed while chained to a bed for the December 1974 issue. In another spread for *Lui*, Birkin posed with none other than Brigitte Bardot, whose voluptuousness Birkin was not shy about lusting after. "I wanted to see every portion of her body to see if she was as beautiful as I thought she was, and she is. Checked from head to toe by me," Birkin wrote in her diary. "There's not one fault in the woman."

She also had a good sense of humor about sexual satisfaction. "'I touched her nipple and she came like a volcano,'" she wrote in her diary, joking about the way some men wrote about sex. "Good luck...but it's not always true!"

Birkin was ahead of her time in living the kind of liberated life that allowed her to publicly enjoy sex on her own terms. She thought showing off her body was empowering: "I was happy to take naked pictures. To be in *Playboy*, even though I wasn't their type at all. I was a kind of object and that's what I wanted to be." She was in control of her own objectification, in other words, and she wanted the world to know it.



SHE'S STILL IT

In *It Girl* (Simon & Schuster, $28), Jane Birkin's first full biography, Marisa Meltzer (also the author of this piece) explores Birkin's path as actress, singer, and cultural force.

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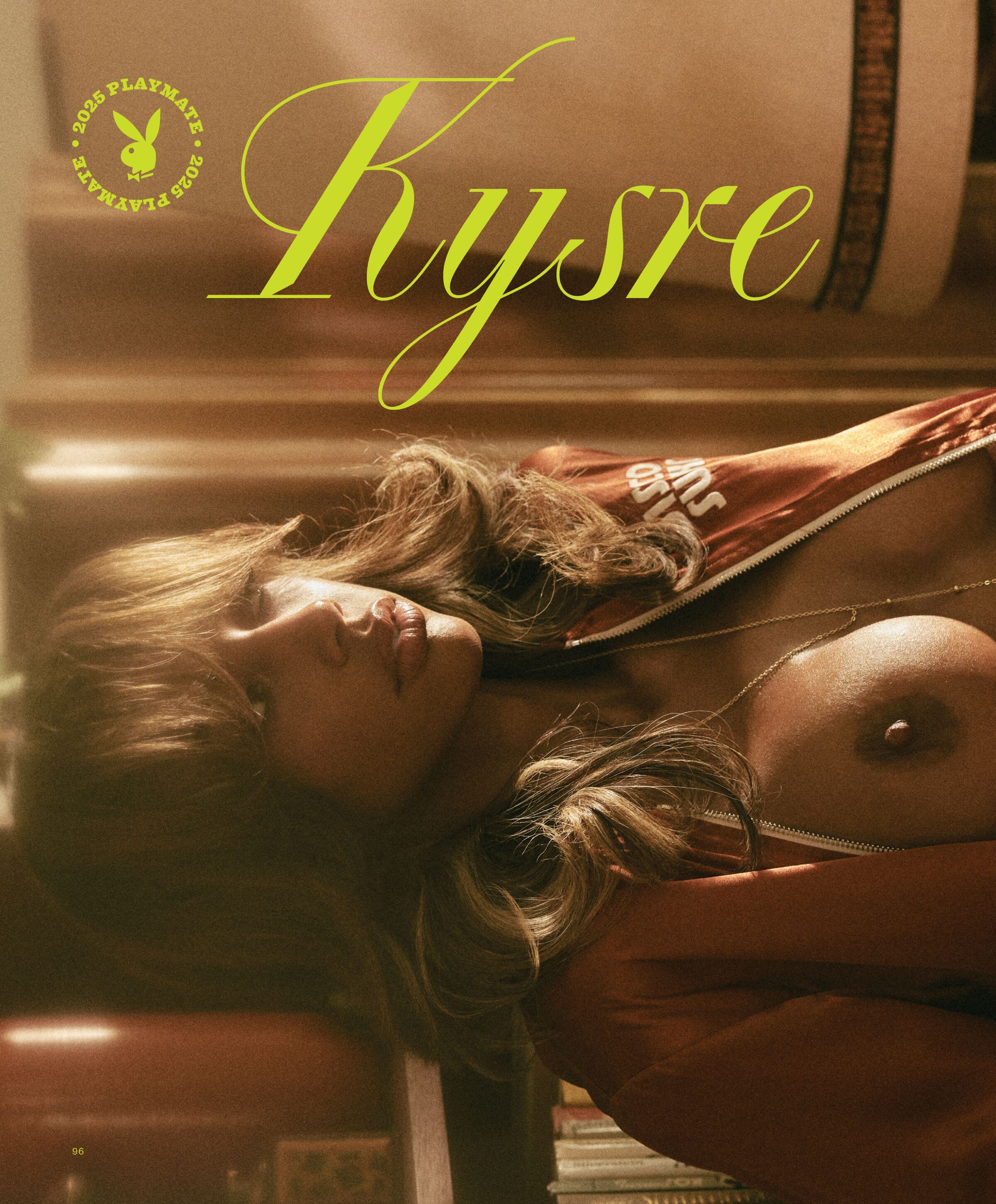
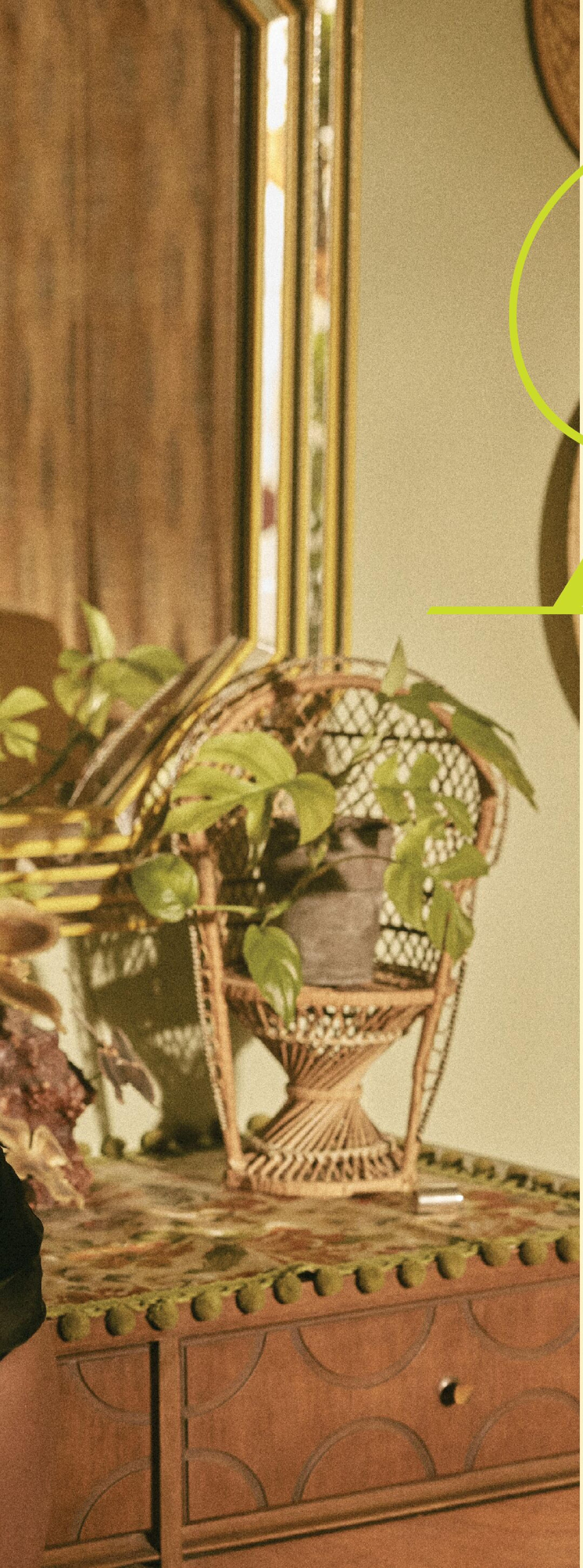
Kysre



MEET MISS JUNE **KYSRE GONDREZICK**, THE FIRST PROFESSIONAL WOMEN'S BASKETBALL PLAYER TO APPEAR IN *PLAYBOY*.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY **DOVE SHORE**



Kysre wants to rewrite the rules of what it means to be a professional athlete. The WNBA player turned free agent is making history as the first female professional basketball player to grace *Playboy*'s pages as a Playmate, part of a larger pursuit of a modeling career. But don't call it a career pivot.

"What people label as a transition, I embody as evolution," says the 28-year-old, whose journey spans from Houston to Michigan, through the University of Michigan and West Virginia University. "I'm not stepping outside who I am. I'm building a multidimensional brand."

The athletic powerhouse discovered her modeling aspirations early. At 8, flipping through her first *Playboy* magazine, she questioned whether she could ever look like the woman on the cover. "I never thought it would be possible, since the woman on the cover looked nothing like me," she says. That moment ignited possibilities she's now bringing to life. "I felt like I was being seen for all sides of who I am: the soft, the bold, the fearless," Kysre says of her *Playboy* shoot. "I'm grateful for the opportunity."

Her approach to modeling involves studying her heroes. She's drawn inspiration from Gisele's aesthetic, Princess Diana's grace, Tyra's walk, and Candice Swanepoel's preparation techniques. Athletically, she finds purpose and balance through Pilates, calling the reformer version "fun work" that doesn't drain her energy like traditional training.

All this prepares her for pinch-me career highlights, like her first runway appearance during New York's Fashion Week, when she walked for Lapointe's 15th-anniversary show. Kysre recalls "training in the gym early that morning" before strutting down the catwalk in the afternoon: "I was so happy to be a part of that experience."

When it comes to choosing where to expend her energy, "I make decisions based on vision, not being visible," Kysre explains. That vision? "Not to play the game, but to become a game changer." A WNBA Hall of Famer once told her that while previous generations of professional basketball players paved the way, Kysre herself is "already cemented." Kysre says, "She recognized my confidence to dare to be different. I'm a Black woman; I don't expect to be treated fairly or equally. Sometimes, I feel like I don't have a blueprint, but I'm creating my own path."

Her work ethic is a point of pride for Kysre: "Becoming a WNBA player and getting to that level, you put in a lot of work to get there. You have to put in even more work to stay there." —SEAN EVANS

What part of yourself were you hoping people would see when you became a *Playmate*?

The part of myself that I hope people would see with me becoming a *Playmate* is my authenticity. I think that with my field in particular you can be categorized in a box, and I don't want my fan base to become uncomfortable with my versatility, so I'm happy to have this platform to showcase that women can do anything that they put their minds to.

What's something people assume about you that's totally wrong?

One thing people assume about me that is totally wrong is thinking that I am the author of my own story. God has put my life on display for people to be witnesses to my journey, along with me as well. And just because you're a witness doesn't make you the author. My story is already written, and I'm happy to watch it with my fan base.

If your bedroom had a name, what would it be?

If my room had a name, it would be Timeless.

How are you rewriting the narrative of what a WNBA player can be off the court?

I am rewriting the narrative of what a WNBA player can be off the court by simply being a Playmate. But also my range. I think for women, our versatility is our strength and our power to be so competitive and to be able to participate in a male-dominated sport, but to be able to still have our femininity and our grace… That display is powerful.

What message do you hope young women will take away from you?

The one message that I hope that young women take away from me is giving themselves permission to restart, refocus, and recharge at any given time. Life is not a race. It is a marathon, not a sprint. And just because you may start off behind doesn't mean that you can't finish first.

If you could text your younger self one sentence, what would it say?

I would text my younger self that if you see it, surely, sweetheart, it is going to come to pass.

What part of your personality is your biggest turn-on?

The part of my personality that is the biggest turn-on is my vulnerability and my resilience.

What scent turns you on instantly?

The one scent that turns me on instantly is Jo Malone.

What song makes you feel like the hottest person in the room?

The one song that makes me feel like the hottest in the room is "Fly Shit Only" by Future. Feels like it's a video that went viral.

Where's the wildest place you've ever changed clothes?

The wildest place I've ever changed clothes is on the set of *Playboy*.

STYLING BY **ORETTA CORBELLI**. MAKEUP BY **SAMUEL PAUL**. HAIR BY **TAHIRAH CARTER**.

HOW THE NBA LOST ITS GRIT

In a league optimized for efficiency, an increasingly vocal counterculture still worships tough twos and chaos.

BY JACK TIEN-DANA

AFTER DECADES OF EVOLUTION, basketball has reached its final frontier. In the 1990s, Michael Jordan became the first high-scoring guard to lead a championship team. In the 2000s, LeBron James, with his uncommon combination of size and playmaking skill, paved the way for a new generation of ball handlers. In 2015, Steph Curry and the technocratic Warriors triumphed so resoundingly that everyone copied them; their emphasis on shooting and defensive versatility still guides every roster.

In the wake of Golden State's dynasty, the rise of analytics pointed teams toward the most effective way to play. Basketball's progression has been replaced by a process of perfection. If Victor Wembanyama and Cooper Flagg are any indication, the stars of tomorrow will play like the stars of today, just with sharper skills ported into ever-bigger and more athletic bodies. By and large, the NBA keeps getting better. And yet: better for whom?

"I think creativity has been taken out of the game," says Ekam Nagra, the host of the influential *Ball Don't Stop* podcast. "The excitement and unpredictability from 10 to 15 years ago is gone."

For Nagra, today's basketball is proficient but soulless. In particular, it's haunted by the void of the hooper. Hoopers are shoot-first guards with flashy handles, defined as much by mindset as skill set. Legendary hoopers (Kobe Bryant, Carmelo Anthony, Jamal Crawford) were single-minded scorers. While modern teams ruthlessly prioritize three-pointers and layups, the hallmark of the hooper is tough shotmaking. The analytical consensus is that a contested midrange jumper is a lower-value shot.

Compared with the halcyon days of 2004, though, hoopers no longer have the same psychic hold over NBA executives as they do with fans. Hoopers like Stephon Marbury and Steve Francis were once perennial All-Stars; today Bones Hyland and Rob Dillingham languish on the bench.

According to an NBA executive who asked not to be named, "The idea that you need to be a hooper to be a good player just isn't how basketball works. The goal of each possession is to create a good shot, not a cool one."

If Nagra was the first person to take up the Plight of the Forgotten Hooper when he launched *Ball Don't Stop* in 2014, throngs of former NBAers, like Kevin Garnett, Paul Pierce, Ray Allen, and

Kendrick Perkins, have joined the cause. As these grievances spread across the For You pages of the easily aggrieved, they picked up momentum.

"There's a weird incentive structure to how people talk about basketball online," says Jack Lubin, who publishes the Substack *Never Hungover* under the pen name Ock Sportello. "Negativity is what has currency on the algorithms."

More than the simple yearning for more Eddie Houses, Lubin posits, this revanchism speaks to the generalized, multipronged anxieties of fandom at large. In this framework, the hooperite preoccupation with isolation scoring swims downstream of the way that sports gambling conditions fans to invest more in individual player performance than the outcome of a game.

Similarly, the fear that uncalloused nepo babies and husky European interlopers have replaced real hoopers runs parallel to the idea that the game has grown less accessible for the average person on every level, as the cost of entry for youth sports and court time has skyrocketed.

Most of all, the mythos of the hooper is the last foothold of familiarity. A lifelong Vancouverite and former community college player, Nagra, 32, loves basketball more than most people love anything. Growing up in the early 2000s, he'd watch Kobe, Vince, and Iverson on TSN, then head to the court for hours.

Since starting his podcast, he's become your favorite player's favorite pundit, landing interviews with Kobe and Iverson. His pro-am, started in 2016 to showcase British Columbian talent, has drawn NBA players like Scottie Barnes and Shaedon Sharpe.

"No one who looks like me had ever really talked about the game like this before," says Nagra, a first-generation Canadian who wears a turban. "I never played D1 or in the NBA, but when I talk, people can tell I'm a hooper."

What started as a way to stay connected to the game has turned into a mission to protect it. His video jeremiads aren't subtle: Hoopers are under attack, besieged by calculator jockeys with "analytics" and the dreaded horde of "casuals."

"I've met analytics guys in real life and had interactions with them," Nagra says, "and I walk away from the convo saying, 'I don't think this guy likes basketball—he just sees it as a stock market.'"

To Nagra, analytics are why every team plays the same way. The basketball of the 2000s, Nagra says, was full of "competition, warfare, and artistry." Now, he bemoans, "casual fans think of the NBA as just a three-point contest."

Broadly, Nagra's diagnosis of the league feels correct. Analytics have changed the mechanics of the sport. Teams do shoot lots of threes. Social media is relentlessly negative and reductive.

But then you watch a game. Every player is supremely gifted and is playing with unprecedented creativity. Young stars like Shai Gilgeous-Alexander and Anthony Edwards unhesitatingly take the kind of midrange jumpers that analytics supposedly banished from the game. Even the most ordinary bench players regularly pull off moves and passes that would've been inconceivable 20 years ago. The vast majority of the guys on the court look, dare I say, pretty hooperish.

"People who promote the idea of the hooper want to be seen as this contrarian counterculture," says Ben Detrick, coauthor of *The Joy of Basketball* and cohost of the *Cookies Hoops* podcast. "But, in many ways, the hoopers are the winners. Young players are coming into the league with a higher level of skills than we've ever seen."

Ironically, the Cult of the Lost Hooper's complaint isn't really rooted in the game itself. "Basketball, in the early 2000s, was at its cultural apex," says Detrick. "Along with rap and streetball, there were so many exciting elements tied to the game."

"When people talk about hoopers," Detrick continues, "they think they're talking about skill sets, but what they're really talking about is culture. I think the real thing that people are actually mourning is the loss of the NBA's edge."

In this sense, the fixation on hoopers is an attempt to reconcile loving something real yet processing it through the internet. Through the NBA's new television rights deal, more games will stream on Prime or Peacock than national TV. *Slam* magazine now publishes only five issues a year. The *NBA Live* video game series is defunct, and the legends of the AND1 Mixtape Tour are deep into middle age. The environment that fostered Nagra's love for basketball no longer exists.

"We're in this really paranoid moment right now," says Lubin. "People have the feeling that things are getting worse but don't totally know who to blame or what forces are actually behind it."

You could try to explain that the hauntology of the hooper is the product of the NBA rejecting the edgier culture of the 2000s and embracing early-2010s social media, which turned the game into something to consume rather than experience; that society's larger fracturing and atomization has shrunk the number of real places to talk hoops and replaced them with rage bait and brain rot; that the stepped-on nature of online conversation now traps you in a recursive loop of talking about talking about basketball; that the attention economy isn't really selling basketball at all, but you—and, more to the point, your time.

But that would make you sound insane. It's a lot easier just to say wistfully that Steve Francis was a hooper.

And so:

"Steve Francis," Nagra says wistfully, "was a hooper."

THE RESISTANCE

Five current players who keep the game messy, unpredictable, and fun—the hooper ideal.

Cam Thomas

Cam Thomas, Brooklyn Nets

Is Cam Thomas a good passer? No. Can he defend? Also no. Does he do the little things that help his team win games? Don't make me laugh. But is he a stone-cold bucket? Absolutely. Averaging a career-high 24 points per game last season, the 23-year-old Thomas has the rare ability to make shots that no other player would even dare take. The most impressive thing about him? He alone makes the Nets worth watching.

Anthony Edwards

Anthony Edwards, Minnesota Timberwolves

There will never be another Michael Jordan. That said, Anthony Edwards—a charismatic shooting guard with best-in-class athleticism, elite scoring instincts, and a signature shoe—looks pretty damn Jordanesque. In each of his first five seasons, the 24-year-old superstar has added a new element to his game, evolving from a raw dunker into an all-court menace. At this point, the only thing truly separating Edwards from His Airness is that Edwards is a much better three-point shooter.

Darius Garland

Darius Garland, Cleveland Cavaliers

Most hoopers possess a certain immodesty, but Darius Garland is notable for his control. As the starting point guard for a Cavs team coming off a 64-win season, the telegenic sixth-year point guard is responsible but never boring. Like Steve Nash and Chris Paul before him, Garland is a floor general with slick handles and a dead-eye jumper. And, sadly, like Nash and Paul, Garland still hasn't figured out how to maintain his regular-season genius through the playoffs.

Cade Cunningham

Cade Cunningham, Detroit Pistons

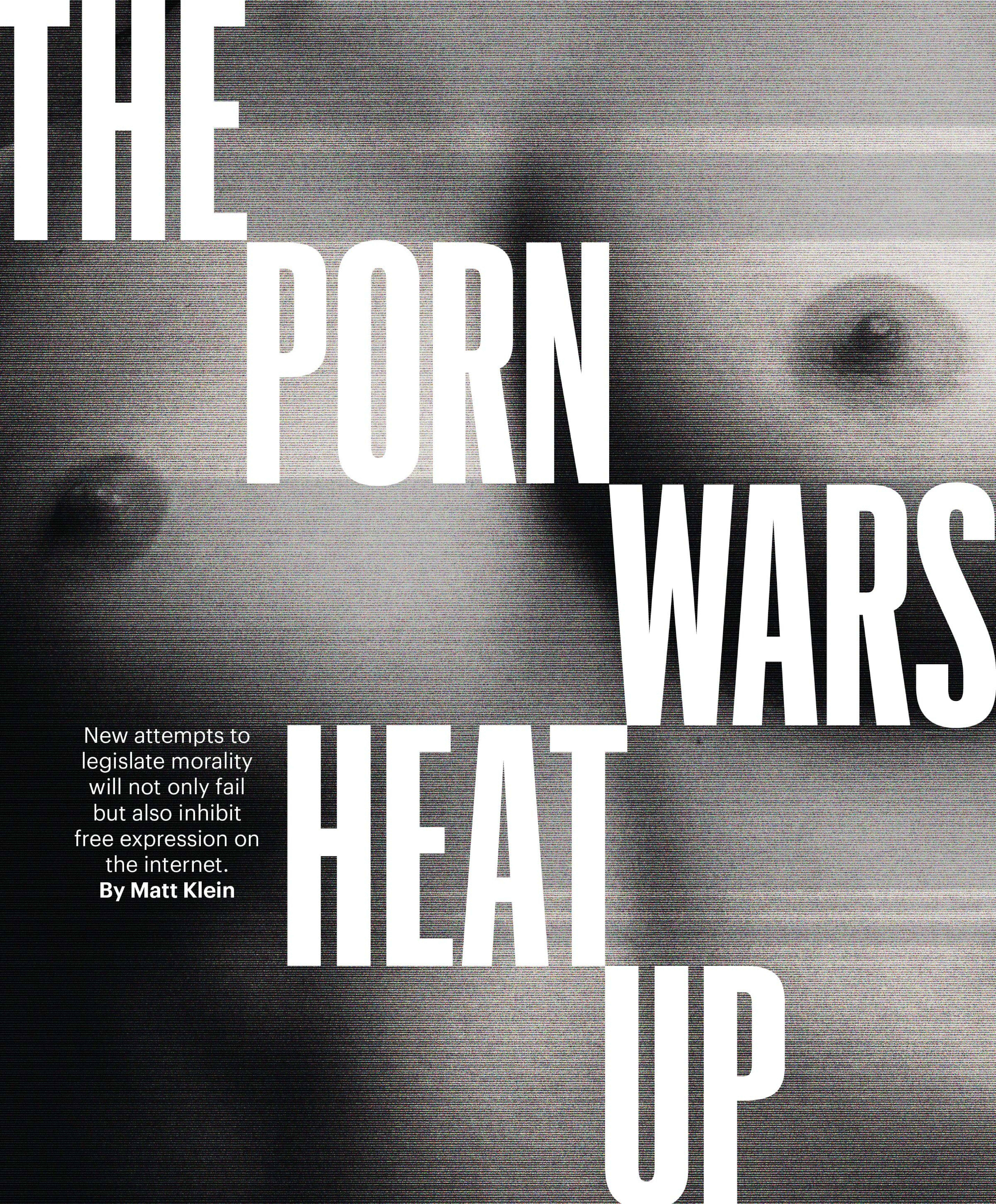
Even as the Detroit Pistons lost an NBA-record 28 consecutive games in the 2023–24 season, Cade Cunningham always looked like a star. Last year, he finally became one, averaging 26.1 points and 9.1 assists per game and leading the Pistons to their first playoff appearance since 2019. Although he's not an explosive athlete, Cunningham is one of the league's savviest operators, a masterful midrange scorer who clears space with footwork and strength.

Naz Reid

Naz Reid, Minnesota Timberwolves

Known as "Big Jelly," Naz Reid proves that hoopers come in all shapes and sizes. Despite clocking in at six feet, nine inches, and weighing roughly 270 pounds, the 2024 Sixth Man of the Year is essentially an extra-extra-large shooting guard, shaking defenders off the dribble and knocking down nearly 40 percent of his threes over the last two seasons.

THIS PAGE, FROM TOP: STEPHEN GOSLING/NATIONAL BASKETBALL ASSOCIATION VIA GETTY IMAGES; NBA PHOTOS/NATIONAL BASKETBALL ASSOCIATION VIA GETTY IMAGES; JASON MILLER/GETTY IMAGES SPORT VIA GETTY IMAGES; JESSE D. GARRABRANT/NATIONAL BASKETBALL ASSOCIATION VIA GETTY IMAGES; DAVID SHERMAN/NATIONAL BASKETBALL ASSOCIATION VIA GETTY IMAGES. OPPOSITE: NOAH GRAHAM/NATIONAL BASKETBALL ASSOCIATION VIA GETTY IMAGES.



THE PORN WARS HEAT UP

New attempts to legislate morality will not only fail but also inhibit free expression on the internet.

By Matt Klein

I

IN THE MARCH 1969 issue of *Playboy*, media theorist Marshall McLuhan warned us: “If we understand the revolutionary transformations caused by new media, we can anticipate and control them; but if we continue in our self-induced subliminal trance, we will be their slaves.”

Porn remains our least understood media and expression. And yet we still refuse to make peace with its history, its current role in culture, and its future. Instead, society views it with shame, as a pathology all its own. We dirty our own view so that we cannot see how complicit we are in its existence. After all, porn is *us*.

More than 20,000 years ago, a faceless four-inch statuette was carved and lay buried until its discovery in Austria in 1908. With an exaggerated ass, thick thighs, and voluptuous breasts, the *Venus of Willendorf* symbolized fertility, power, and abundance, according to historians. It may also be our first piece of erotic art and tool to arouse. Later, the Turin Erotic Papyrus, dating to ancient Egypt around 1150 BCE, took a comical approach, featuring animals acting like humans alongside explicit sexual illustrations depicting men with dicks the size of their torsos. This early stag mag predated *Playboy* by more than 3,000 years.

Fast-forward to the 15th century and the printing press held the noblest promise. Soon after the press started churning out reproductions, the market discovered what really sells: scandal. Sex and scandal. Six centuries later and the internet became what it is because of innovations driven by porn—from online payment processing to live streaming.

Today, there has never been so much variety. Rule 34 tells us that if you can imagine it, there’s a pornographic version somewhere on the internet. “Shrek” is currently searched more frequently on Pornhub than “Star Trek,” “Batgirl,” or “Superman.” Hentai, or animated porn, is a rapidly growing category for its limitlessness and peace of mind for viewers. (You can’t exploit a cartoon.)

Meanwhile, worldwide, women now account for 38 percent of all Pornhub visitors, up from 14 percent just a decade ago. OnlyFans counts 4.6 million individual creators earning over $5.8 billion annually. Some are so busy, they outsource their sexting to Pakistani call centers. Camming sites, also counting millions in views and revenue, permit once passive viewers to become active sexual partners who pay to control models’ vibrating dildos from overseas. Or take feminist or ethical porn, which now markets sexual expression as more authentic, artistic, and equitable around labor. Prominent feminist porn producer Erika Lust says, “The female gaze is vital to challenge the porn status quo, confront this industry’s male domination, and offer alternatives.”

Yet for all this documented diversity and persistence across millennia and media, and despite porn’s financial valuation being bigger than baseball, the music industry, or all cable news networks combined, America persists in oversimplifying this complex social phenomenon while attempting to eliminate what has proven ineliminable. Like a game of whack-a-mole, every effort to censor, restrict, or banish pornography fails to reckon with the fundamental truth that we cannot control what we refuse to understand about ourselves and our desires.

THIS PAGE: BRANDSTAETTER IMAGES/HULTON ARCHIVE VIA GETTY IMAGES.

DESPITE PORN’S FINANCIAL VALUATION BEING BIGGER THAN... ALL CABLE NEWS NETWORKS COMBINED, AMERICA PERSISTS IN OVERSIMPLIFYING THIS COMPLEX SOCIAL PHENOMENON.

According to Marty Klein, Ph.D., one of the world’s leading sex therapists, in his book *America’s War on Sex*: “The war on porn is a psychologically perfect solution to the confusion, anger, self-criticism, and shame that many Americans feel about sexuality and modern life. It’s short-sighted, futile, self-destructive, undignified, and disempowering. But it provides an explanation, a target, and hope.”

THE SEX RECESSION

It’s been pointed out many times (including in this issue) that we live in dire times when it comes to sex. People are fucking at record-low rates. In 1990, 55 percent of people had sex at least once a week. Today, it’s 37 percent. It’s worse for young adults. Fewer than half of single men received any physical affection in the last week. Nearly a quarter of people aged 18 to 29 had not had sex in the past year; twice as many as in 2010. Many fingers point to porn as the reason. But the truth is more like an intricate tapestry of contributing factors.

Financial instability, living with parents, delayed life milestones, and stifling, costly social activities are some. There’s also our loneliness crisis, more stress at work, and longer working hours. Dating apps spawned the paradox of choice, when more options yield less satisfaction. Online socialization creates a mirage of connection, while traditional third spaces—those quaint places, like clubs and bars, where we met in the flesh—are disappearing. In London, one in five pubs has shut down over the past decade, while 54 percent of Americans now report that they visit a third space regularly, down significantly from 67 percent in 2019. Throw in weakening communication skills, mental illness, and a cocktail of chemicals from SSRIs, GLP-1s, birth control, processed foods, and environmental toxins and, yeah, of course sex rates are in flux.

Porn is complicit in how we show up—or don't—in our sexual encounters, but to condemn porn as the sole perpetrator here is myopic. It's an easy way out. Our tendency to reduce and scapegoat reflects our larger cultural discomfort with complexity itself—and porn's true nature epitomizes such complexity. There's an intellectual prejudice against porn, prohibiting it to exist as a legitimate topic of study. The only people who take it seriously are its opponents.

Decades ago, cultural critic Laura Kipnis pointed out in her book *Bound and Gagged*: "As a culture, our intellectually shriveled approach to pornography has similarly avoided any such disturbing acts of self-recognition: daring nothing, denying everything."

Amid a polycrisis of radical social polarization, climate collapse, and violent debates about reality itself, decoding porn is not only a worthy exercise—it's a necessary one. It is a remedy for endangered critical thinking. Our muscles for nuance are atrophied, we suffer from media illiteracy, and we're intolerant of mere disagreement. We're hypocritical and rigid in black-or-white reasoning. In subtlety and inquiry is our civility. What we won't confront controls us. So how are we ever going to face, let alone overcome, the crises ahead of us if we can't embrace our own messy, contradictory humanity and the messy, collaborative solutions we require?

If porn is considered so obviously bad for us yet remains so pervasive, we must ask some pretty hard questions: Do we know what's good for us? Do we require intervention to protect us from ourselves? And if we cannot navigate, let alone make peace, with something as fundamental as our own sexualities and humanity in all its variety and complication, how can we ever address anything else with curiosity and respect?

WHEN FEAR BECOMES LAW: BIG BROTHER AND BACK DOORS

Since 2022, governments across the United States, and beyond, have been passing legislation requiring porn watchers to verify their ages. From Louisiana and Utah to the United Kingdom and Australia, these laws are designed to prevent children from accessing pornography. Of course you ask: "Who wouldn't support this?" In taking a closer look, though, the intent may be reasonable, but the execution… well, it's complicated.

Consider Texas's HB 1181, passed in 2023. The law requires online platforms to conduct age verification, ensuring visitors are over 18, if more than one-third of the content qualifies as "sexual material harmful to minors."

Does the act of requiring a government ID to access material on the internet infringe upon free speech and our access to information? In the eyes of Texas lawmakers, these trade-offs are worthwhile and hardly worthy of examination: If protecting children has unintentionally chilling effects on the rest of the population, so be it.

MAGS
VIDEO'S
SEX

The case challenging HB 1181, *Free Speech Coalition v. Paxton*, went all the way to the Supreme Court, where the conservative majority upheld the law, deciding that requiring age verification to prevent children from accessing sexually explicit content is within a state's authority.

The decision goes against earlier precedent. In *Reno v. ACLU* (1997) and *Ashcroft v. ACLU* (2004), the court historically struck down laws that restricted access to sexual content online. They consistently ruled that making "indecent" or "offensive" speech a crime—just because minors might see it—violated the First Amendment.

But in upholding Texas's HB 1181, the court brushed aside those earlier warnings. As the Electronic Frontier Foundation, the leading nonprofit organization defending civil liberties online, explains, "[The court's decision] ignores the many ways in which verifying age online is significantly more burdensome and invasive than doing so in person." Checking an ID for beer at a 7-Eleven is over before you know it, unlike uploading an ID on the internet, which can ultimately create trackable, hackable, and commodifiable records of private desires, whose futures are uncertain. Also, it should be noted, buying alcohol is not a protected right under the United States Constitution, while the right to access protected speech as an adult is.

Now nearly half the states across America are proposing similar laws. In some states and countries, you can opt out of handing over an ID by submitting to a facial scan or sharing your banking information. As for what material is "sexual" or "harmful to minors" and requires an ID check, what a *great* question. As we've witnessed in our current sociopolitical climate, one community's health resource is another's poisonous mind virus.

Such subjectivity isn't coincidental. It reflects our deeply ingrained hierarchies of sexuality. Cultural anthropologist Gayle Rubin proposed the "charmed circle" framework to illustrate how we create a pecking order of sexual behaviors, privileging heteronormative, monogamous, procreative sex between married couples as acceptable, while marginalizing anything outside of these narrow parameters as deviant or harmful. In her landmark essay "Thinking Sex," Rubin writes, "Sex is

PHOTOGRAPH: **PEETERV/E+ VIA GETTY IMAGES.**

AS WE'VE WITNESSED IN OUR CURRENT SOCIOPOLITICAL CLIMATE, ONE COMMUNITY'S HEALTH RESOURCE IS ANOTHER'S POISONOUS MIND VIRUS.

presumed guilty until proven innocent." And as designed, age verifications allow an enforcement of particular visions for sexuality.

This moral hierarchy amid the pervasiveness of porn is leading to real psychological tension for those navigating it. Research from the Survey Center on American Life shows that 64 percent of 18- to 24-year-olds agree porn should be *harder* to access—more than any other male age group between 18 and 54, up from 51 percent in 2013. But it's this same demographic that is the largest share of visitors to Pornhub. This is a profound moral and emotional conflict requiring our full attention. Stuck, young adults are simultaneously the primary consumers and the primary critics of porn.

But are these age efforts even effective? Of course not. In only four hours after Florida's HB 3 age-verification law came into effect, VPN usage spiked by 1,150 percent. The U.K. had similar results after enacting its age-verification laws. Further, when adults are deterred from accessing lawful content, they're nudged toward smaller, darker platforms that have no problem not complying. Researchers at New York University's Center for Social Media and Politics and Stanford University's Politics and Social Change Lab found that once Pornhub pulled out of states with age-verification laws, there was a 48 percent increase in searches for a noncompliant platform.

The Supreme Court's ruling on HB 1181 isn't just legal precedent but an artifact symbolizing our anxiety around sexuality, paternalism, and privacy. We're so upset that porn has become our nation's de facto sex education, but whose fault is that? In America, only half the states require sex education to be medically accurate. Desperate for answers, our youth turn to porn. But no one thinks we should learn how to drive from *Grand Theft Auto* or how to resolve conflict like UFC fighters. Unfortunately, because we don't talk about how porn is fictitious, college students end up choking their partners because they think that's what they're supposed to do... even when studies reveal that many men don't even enjoy it.

We're left in the theater of moralized politics. Posturing is more applaudable than actual safety. Age verification isn't about protection as much as it's about control. No one is taught anything, and nothing is discussed. We've ironically sacrificed free speech because we're uncomfortable discussing the most embarrassing aspects of it. "We may not all want to defend porn," Hannah Wohl, Ph.D., professor of sociology at the University of California, Santa Barbara, writes in *The Hill*. "But if we care about free speech and digital privacy, we must. Because what starts with porn rarely ends there."

WHEN POLITICS TRUMPS DATA: COOKING THE BOOKS ON SEX

In 1967, President Lyndon B. Johnson and the U.S. Congress funded the President's Commission on Obscenity and Pornography. After three years, the commission issued a 656-page report that refuted the prevailing myths put forth by anti-porn crusaders, concluding that "there was insufficient evidence that exposure to explicit sexual materials played a significant role in the causation of delinquent or criminal behavior." Inheriting these results, President Richard Nixon rejected the conclusions, calling them "morally bankrupt." The commission may have encountered a stubborn reality where human sexuality was far more fluid than they had hoped. But this was not a message people wanted to hear.

Eighteen years later, during the Reagan presidency, under the direction of Attorney General Edwin Meese, the gang was at it again. This time, they didn't let free inquiry get in the way of their preexisting narrative. The Meese commission's budget was one-fourth the size of the previous inquiry, and the effort was stacked with anti-porn advocates and prosecutors. They did not fund original, empirical scientific research, only anecdotal testimony and reinterpretation of existing studies. Rigged from the get-go, the eventual 1,960-page report—four times the length of the 1967 report—resoundingly and finally concluded that pornography negatively impacts family and society.

Before the report was even published, Meese's anti-porn activists sent letters to retailers, including 7-Eleven and Rite Aid, warning them they'd be listed as "porn distributors" in the final report unless they removed magazines like *Playboy* from their shelves. The stores obliged. And out of an abundance of caution, they also threw away *Cosmopolitan* and *American Photographer*.

After getting wind of what was happening, *Playboy*, joined by the American Booksellers Association, swiftly sued Meese and the commission. And just as quickly, U.S. District Judge John Garrett Penn of the District of Columbia called the commission's actions "an informal scheme of government censorship" and ordered the commission to send follow-up letters withdrawing these threats and confirming no corporation would be included in their report.

Once the report was finally released, the commission did something, somehow even more astonishing: They showed their cards. Henry Hudson, the commission's chairman, admitted that their findings were based on "moral and ethical considerations." He acknowledged: "If we relied exclusively on scientific data for every one of our findings, I'm afraid all of our work would be inconclusive." Commissioner Frederick Schauer offered a similarly revealing take: "The absence of evidence should by no means be taken to deny the existence of a causal link." In other words, just because we can't prove the existence of unicorns, it doesn't mean they don't exist. Appalled by how the Meese report was handled, two commission members, Ellen Levine and Judith Becker, issued this public dissent: "No self-respecting investigator would accept conclusions based on such a study."

Today, the Meese playbook lives on. From porn and pandemics to election integrity, gun violence, and access to reproductive health, we've perfected the act of denying inconvenient truths. We dismiss dizzying cognitive dissonance, and we prioritize comfortable personal beliefs over more uncomfortable truths. We religiously manufacture moral panics, cherry-pick and fabricate evidence to affirm existing ideologies, and distill explanations into succinct

conspiracy theories. Bullshitting is modeled and normalized by our leaders. And we ignore or viciously attack contradictory support. In our moment of frictionless hyperconvenience, even our reality comes personalized. Our real obscenity isn't what consenting adults do or watch in their homes; it's what we've done to the very concept of truth, our openness to it, and our active pursuit of it.

WHEN WE MEDICALIZE MORALITY: FROM SIN TO SICKNESS

Over the years, critics of porn have shifted their arguments away from morals and to that of health. Take, for example, the rise of porn addiction. Despite its sudden proliferation, porn addiction is not recognized by the World Health Organization (in its *International Classification of Diseases*, or *ICD-11*), the American Psychiatric Association (in its diagnostic manual, the *DSM-5*, and its more recent follow-up, the *DSM-5-TR*), or the American Association of Sexuality Educators, Counselors and Therapists. Why? A lack of empirical evidence. It's considered a "perceived addiction." Or, more medically accurate, we're dealing with compulsive sexual behaviors and manifestations of—or coping mechanisms for—other mental illnesses.

We should not question the very real suffering of those who identify as addicts. More, not less, empathy and support are warranted here. But what's happening here is more complex than we realize. Studies consistently support that it isn't the frequency of porn consumption that predicts one's addiction but rather one's moral compass. Joshua Grubbs, Ph.D., a leading researcher in this space and a professor of psychology at the University of New Mexico, calls this "moral incongruence." Those who morally oppose porn because of religious or philosophical beliefs are three times more likely to identify as addicts than frequent consumers who don't have any ethical conflicts. This transcends to imagination writ large. In *Tell Me What You Want*, a survey of Americans' sexual fantasies, Justin Lehmiller, Ph.D., a social psychologist and research fellow at the Kinsey Institute, writes, "The rarer [someone] thought it [their fantasy] was, the more shame, guilt, embarrassment, anxiety they felt." Enter self-diagnoses. To Alan McKee, Ph.D., a leading scholar and voice in sex and media studies at the University of Sydney, "we are addicted to addiction." We're self-pathologizing in a culture obsessed with optimization and endless fixing. The church once saved us; now we're incessantly solving with therapy-speak.

Pseudoscience is compelling. NoFap, an online community of millions of men abstaining from masturbation, claims that after 90 days, one's brain reboots, granting newfound superpowers like mental clarity and the confidence to finally approach women. In an NPR interview, Dr. Ashley Winter, a urologist in Los Angeles, says, "I have seen claims on social media saying that semen retention can boost your testosterone levels, cure erectile dysfunction, make you more manly, make you stronger, cure depression, make you more successful, clear your skin—and there is no medical evidence that it does any of those things." But who's to dismiss *perceived* benefits? Maybe what's really happening here is that men are finally finding a sense of community, goal achievement, and a rare

PHOTOGRAPH: SIMON EMMETT/TRUNK ARCHIVE. MODEL DEPICTED IS A PROFESSIONAL MODEL AND NOT REPRESENTED BY THE TEXT.

THE REAL OBSCENITY ISN'T WHAT CONSENTING ADULTS DO OR WATCH IN THEIR HOMES; IT'S WHAT WE'VE DONE TO THE VERY CONCEPT OF TRUTH, OUR OPENNESS TO IT, AND OUR ACTIVE PURSUIT OF IT.

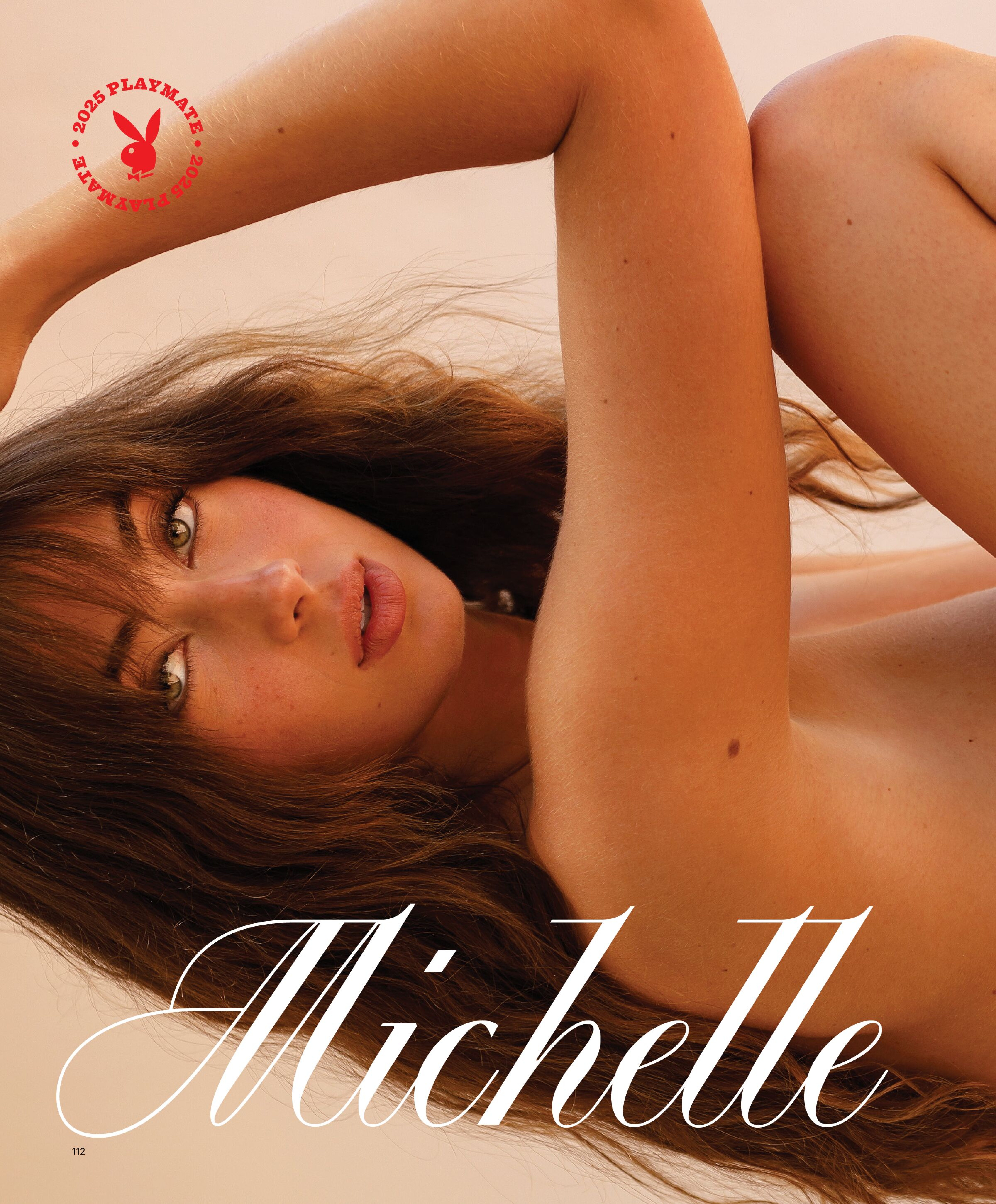
space to openly discuss their sexuality and health without judgment. NoFap epitomizes our cultural fixation with binaries and simple solutions. You can either watch porn and be a dateless incel or quit porn and become successful in every aspect of your life. If only life was this cut-and-dried. NoFap's own founder is even open to the placebo effect here.

That we're nowhere close to reckoning with porn should worry us. In the same way we nostalgically look at McLuhan's warning or the images in *Playboy* from 1969, we will undoubtedly look back at today's tube, cam, and model fan sites with bewilderment over their simplicity. Even today's pornographic moral quandaries, like "Can you cheat on your spouse by creating a hypersexual AI version of your spouse?" will soon sound quaint. How do we begin to explain that Brazil is 65 percent more likely to consume trans porn than the global average, yet the country has the highest rate of trans murder in the world? Despite its illegality, deepfake tech remains widely available and continues to proliferate. We still know very little about the neurochemical impacts of prolonged exposure to porn. (Not having an experimental control group who has never seen porn handcuffs us.) And with AI, a runaway attention economy, and parasocial relationships compounding rates of isolation, mental illness, and sexlessness, matters are only going to get more divisive and ethically blurry. We are painfully unprepared for the strangeness ahead. Porn will be *just one* manifestation.

Porn, of all places, reveals how much we actually have in common. Porn invites avid consumers and fearful critics alike to find common ground in our shared values. But we must remember this isn't a zero-sum game where some values must be sacrificed for others. Freedom, empowerment, safety, education, privacy, labor rights, artistic expression, public health, childhood development, human rights, media literacy, social cohesion, relationship skills, and pleasure must *all* be considered.

If, and when, we can learn to engage with porn's polarization and paradoxes, we may develop the critical thinking required for facing the complexity facing us. Porn is a dirty mirror reflecting who we are, what drives us, and what turns us on. It reflects what we are most fearful of and where our values lie, diverge, and contradict. Pretending that it doesn't exist or hoping to nuke it will get us nowhere. Porn compels us to wipe away our judgments, shame, and denial so we can take a better look at ourselves. There's much to study. We need eye contact and honesty like never before.

It's this self-reflection that will prepare us for whatever comes next. And God knows we'll need it.


2025 PLAYMATE • 2025 PLAYMATE •

Michelle

FOR MISS JULY **MICHELLE WEISSTUCH**, THE AMAZON RAINFOREST TAUGHT HER TO FIND HER OWN PATH.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY **ANA DIAS**

Michelle is fluent in six languages—Portuguese, German, Russian, Ukrainian, English, and Spanish—but the Amazon rainforest taught her something more valuable than dialect: the power of listening to yourself. The 24-year-old German-born model of Ukrainian heritage splits her time between Paris for work and Madeira, Portugal, for recharging, but it's the jungle in the Brazilian state of Acre where she discovered her calling.

"The Amazon is very alive," she explains. "There's a lot to discover and learn, and I have found family and lifelong connections there." What began as joining a friend's personal mission evolved into seven months of solo immersion with Indigenous communities, learning traditional wisdom that modern society has forgotten.

Now Michelle bridges these worlds through Symbiosis, her initiative that connects contemporary life with Indigenous knowledge. Her aim is to build a platform for cultural exchange through documentaries, artists' submissions, concerts, and rainforest expeditions. "Indigenous groups have wisdom we lack in modern society, but we also have knowledge for them as the world becomes more connected."

The jungle transformed her understanding of guidance and self-trust. "We all seek a master or someone who knows answers, one who can guide us externally, even though we know we need to do the journey from within," she says. She funnels this philosophy into radical self-reliance: "There's no right and wrong; there's only your heart." Follow it, she believes, to achieve true transformation. Along that journey, there will be fears, anxieties, doubts, and "wanting to fit in, not knowing your path," she admits. "The only way out is through."

This wisdom was hard-earned. Michelle describes a period of losing herself to negative voices in her head, falling into depression that ultimately became a blessing by leading her to her current path. "When I feel negative, it's about learning to handle the waves of life," she says. "We cannot control these waves. We can only observe them and surrender."

Part of centering herself is what Michelle calls conscious breathing through the heart. "I take a moment, visualize beautiful life entering with each inhale, then release everything that doesn't serve me with each exhale," she says. Michelle starts and ends each day with this exercise. "It grounds me and gives me clarity."

This winter, Michelle will return to the Amazon for several months, organizing and hosting individuals and groups seeking healing or enlightenment. Driving her is a yearning for unending enrichment. "Right now, I'm learning to sing through meditation work, and I recently picked up guitar," she says. "I was in the jungle and missed my piano, but there's always a guitar present. There's always room for improvement." —SEAN EVANS

Where are you from?

I am born and raised in Germany, but I have Ukrainian roots.

What's one thing you want people to know about you beyond what they see online?

One thing I never shared is that I dedicated a lot of my life to music and especially studying piano and classical music. Nowadays I also fell in love with the guitar and singing.

What does being a Playmate mean to you?

It's definitely an honor for me, especially because *Playboy* in Germany was my first shoot experience, which opened up for me the journey of modeling. And now with *Playboy* U.S., it feels like a continuation of it and I'm very grateful.

Tell us a secret.

The truth is, I don't really have secrets because I prefer to move through life like an open book. Every one of us is protected, and things find their way to you in life, so I prefer the vulnerability to show and be remembered as who I am authentically.

Describe your perfect day.

Every day is a blissful day, and because simply I am, I can breathe and I can learn. But definitely something that comes closest to a perfect day is when I'm able to share this with beautiful people from heart to heart as today. So thank you.

You've traveled the world. Where's a place that's shaped you most and why?

Actually, every place adds a certain shape to you if you stay present, but something that really caught my heart is the Amazon jungle. I had, for a long time, the call to visit the heart of Mother Earth, and I'm very grateful that I had this opportunity. The amount of truth, love, connection, expansion of consciousness… That really caught my attention, and I'm very grateful for that.

How do you stay grounded while always moving?

The last two years I started to travel a lot, and it was a bit difficult for me to connect and stay myself in these places. Now I developed my personal rituals, meditation, and avocado and eggs. That nourished me.

Tell us about your work in the Amazon rainforest. What inspired you to start this project with Indigenous communities?

This project was born from my personal experiences where I went on a deep journey of transformation, purification, and learning what it means to connect from heart to life, to people, and to myself. Today, my team and I are working to bridge the modern world and ancient wisdom together. It's called Symbiosis, and we welcome anyone who would love to contribute to this consciousness movement where we explore what it means again to live as a collective in harmony and peace. And we aim to inspire you to contribute in a way where we think multigenerational again.

What's your relationship with nature, and how has it shaped your relationship with yourself?

Everything is a mirror, and nature is a great master and teacher to bring you back into presence, to reduce the noise, especially of the modern world, and bring you back home.

What was it like shooting with Ana Dias again?

I'm incredibly happy to have the chance to work with Ana—where the professional side led me to a heart connection also and a personal one. I really admire her for her art, her sense of beauty, the illustration, how she does it. And it's always an honor when I have the chance to meet her and to work. I love her.

HAIR AND MAKEUP BY CLAUDIA FONSECA AND RAQUEL BATALHA

INSIDE THE DARK WORLD OF DATE RAPE POISONINGS

It's an invisible scourge and more common than anyone realizes. But now some cities are finally waking up to the problem.

BY CHARLES GRAEBER

ILLUSTRATIONS BY **VARTIKA SHARMA**

IT BEGAN LIKE ANY WEEKEND EVENING.

IT BEGAN LIKE ANY WEEKEND EVENING: Kirsty, 27, stepped into a Lower East Side club, music throbbing, drinks neon bright, expectations high. She ordered a gin and tonic. A man smiled. She smiled back. She turned her head for a moment. Five hours later, she woke up in a locked bathroom stall, vomit on her shoes, her purse gone, phone dead. Her memory: a clean void.

In New York City, the official record on spiked drinks is quiet. There is no NYPD tracking category, no standard testing protocol, no New York–specific data. What exists instead is raw accounts: clubgoers, mostly women, describing a sudden fog, confusion, helplessness.

Some venues have tried to respond: In 2019, the G.O.A.T., a bar in Staten Island, started putting plastic lids over drinks after multiple allegations. Manager Breanna Grammer told ABC7 New York: “My heart just dropped, our eyes have been almost bleeding looking at these cameras.... It is such a dark environment and so many people are so crammed into each other.... It’s almost impossible to see everything going on around you.”

New York’s prevention landscape remains decentralized. A few bars quietly offer test strips if asked; others do nothing. Advocacy groups now push for measures like those passed by California state lawmakers in 2023 and 2024 to prevent drink-spiking. As State Assembly member Josh Lowenthal, a former nightclub owner, told local journalists, the problem had “gotten to crisis proportions.”

Under the first law spearheaded by Lowenthal, about 2,400 licensed bars and clubs must post signs reading “Don’t get roofied! Drink spiking drug test kits available here. Ask a staff member for details,” and they must offer test kits—which commonly detect drugs like GHB and ketamine—on request. Another law adds the availability of cups with lids to the mandate. Staff training to spot spiking symptoms becomes mandatory in 2027 under a new measure.

Within months of the earlier laws taking effect, hundreds of bars displayed the signage and stocked kits. A spokesperson for the Mother Lode, a bar in West Hollywood, told

WHY ARE THERE NO ARRESTS? THE DRUGS DISAPPEAR FAST. VICTIMS SELDOM REPORT; MEMORY GAPS ERASE THE NARRATIVE. PERPETRATORS VANISH. THE CRIME DISSOLVES.

the *Los Angeles Times*: "There weren't lids here before, and now they are.... Not much has changed; it doesn't cost a thing." The sentiment: Safety came without major expense.

Down in New Orleans, nightlife blends revelry with risk. Progress has been slower but is emerging. In October 2021, police at Loyola and Tulane Universities warned students of drink-spiking near campus. In an email, Todd Warren, chief of police at Loyola, wrote: "We are concerned that students...may have been served illegal substances without their knowledge or consent, putting them in danger." Tulane chief of police Kirk Bouyelas said investigators were probing reports that one or more individuals were "preying on students."

By mid-2025, the New Orleans Office of Nighttime Economy began distributing free test strips for bars to offer to patrons—voluntarily, not by mandate. One bartender on Frenchmen Street said, "You'd be surprised how many people come to Bourbon Street thinking nothing bad can happen.... But it happens here all the time. And we've had to start watching the watchers." Though not law, this quiet intervention signals awareness.

Across these cities, the stories are eerily consistent: a drink left unattended, a blackout, and no trace. Victims rarely pursue charges—they doubt evidence will survive the night. Even police responses can trivialize complaints: "How many drinks did you have?" "Were you dancing?" The skepticism can be institutional.

Why are there no arrests? The drugs disappear fast; labs analyze toxicology only if samples are collected quickly, and even then, results are often inconclusive. Victims seldom report; memory gaps erase the narrative. Perpetrators vanish. The crime dissolves.

With justice elusive, survivors have turned to social media as witness stand and alarm bell. Reddit threads and Instagram captions overflow: "It happened to me too," "I felt way drunker than I should," "woke up in ER bruised and alone." These online stories have coalesced into a grassroots archive that eyes the shadows.

In California, by contrast, the law speaks loud. Bar owners expressed measured support: "an insignificant cost for the safety of patrons." The logic is simple: Lids and kits are cheap; trust and prevention, priceless. In New Orleans, participation remains voluntary—but it's visible. Word of mouth, university alerts, subtle signage: Bars have started offering protective tools. A few have quietly placed test strips behind their counters and added discreet reminders to stay vigilant.

But New York remains unattended terrain—shored up only by individual venues that proactively offer lids and hire undercover security. These measures are a start but not necessarily a solution. Even vigilant staff admit the obvious: No one can monitor every corner of a packed bar.

What ties these cities together is not nightlife culture but its underbelly: dim lighting, crowded bars, unattended drinks, inconsistent venue policy, fast-metabolizing drugs, and victims lost in memory gaps and shame. The violence happens not in plain sight but in denial.

The path ahead—some argue—is legislative, cultural, structural. California has mandated postings, test kits, lids, staff training, and response protocols. New Orleans is edging toward accountability, mixing bar-level fixes with public alerts. In New York, proposals circulate as advocates press for standardized data tracking and laws.

But more than laws, the hardest change is cultural: believing survivors, stamping out dismissals, demanding venues take responsibility before the blackout—not after. Because when someone wakes up dumbfounded, bruised, with pieces missing, the world they lose is real. And until we act, that loss remains concealed in crowded rooms, digital silence, and legal gray zones.

If the Dirt Girls can't make you compost, the world is completely fucked.

Waste Not, Want Not

PHOTOGRAPHS BY *Cara Stricker*

STYLING BY *Hillary Taymour*

"I love being naked in nature," SAYS SARAH McDANIEL. "I love to use my sexual energy, which is just creative energy, in everything that I do."

The most critical use of that sexual energy? Composting.

Just over a year ago, Dirt Girls cofounders McDaniel, 29, Jaskrit Bhalla, 26, and Kieanna Jolaei, 34, set off to weaponize that sexual energy to compel Angelenos to dispose of their food waste in ways that better help the environment. "We would see videos of Erewhon and a full basket of produce that was perfectly fine with minor bruises in the trash," McDaniel says. "We started to observe coffee shops and any food-based event and just see how much waste was going straight to the landfill." Sure, it'd be nice if that food was never wasted at all, but at least they could promote the next best thing: giving it to the worms.

The Dirt Girls collective works with local farms to help facilitate this process, but it also fosters a community of individuals who compost on their own. "If you grow your own produce, then your own compost is one of the most nutrient-dense things that you can add to that produce," says McDaniel.

"It is such a beautiful cycle to see that this food, these food scraps, can be food for worms, and they can turn into the most rich fertilizer and soil that we could use," Jolaei says. "We call it black gold."

The process itself is something that the Dirt Girls explain with an aura of eroticism—and mystique.

"The compost is actually the medium between life and death," explains Jolaei. "Mycelium is in the soil, talking and helping trees communicate. There's just so much connectedness, and there's no rush in whatever they're doing." As she suggests, there's a benefit in approaching our time with the same ease: "I find that when I'm more relaxed, when I have a calm nervous system, I'm able to be more expressive in my sensuality."

The idea isn't that composting is just some chore you should do for the good of the environment (which itself is a fine reason), but that composting will make you a happier, more relaxed, more attractive person.

Barring that, McDaniel has some advice for those of us looking for a way to reconnect with ourselves and nature. You can try meditating, of course, or going for morning walks where you stop and touch the trees. "Take a moment to look at the leaves, look at the way that the light shines through them, and look at the sky and think about how it all is working together to create this environment for us," she says.

Jolaei has one other suggestion: "Eat more mushrooms." Yes, those kinds.

BY *Magdalene Taylor*

MODELS Sarah McDaniel, Jaskrit Bhalla, Desjah Altvater, Jennifer Atilémile, Ecleen Luzmila Caraballo, Kelly Cloud, Cecily Flight, Genevieve Jenkins, Alex Losung, Laura Lee Madigan, Charlie Ann Max, Marcia Prentice, Kalyja Rain, Arden Sanchez, Wendy Sanchez, Kenzie Shaye, Angelica Yeleshwarapu.

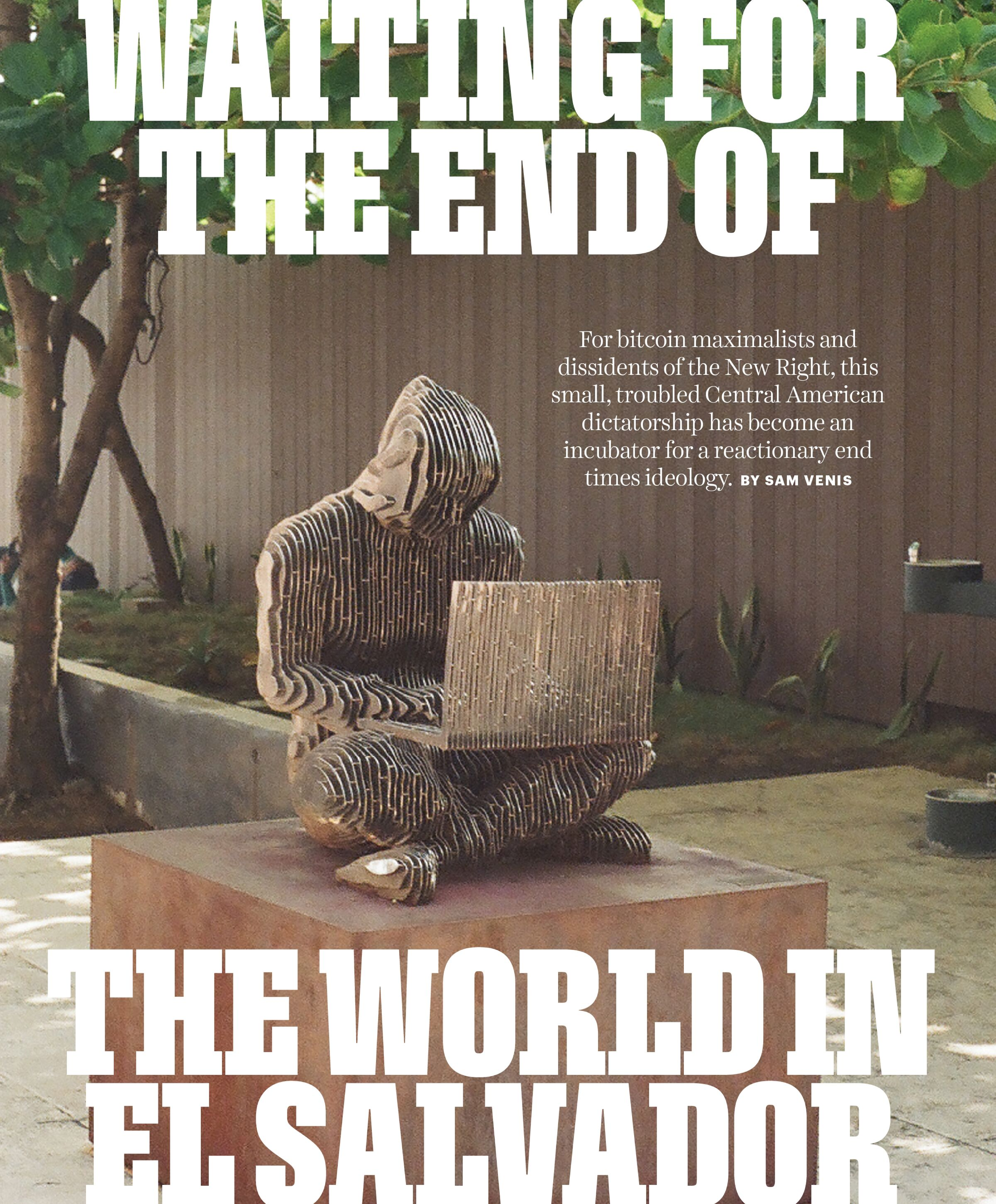
Six Months After the End of the World

“The compost is actually the medium between life and death.”

PRODUCER RAFAELA REMY SANCHEZ
KEY HAIR STYLIST ADRIAN ARREDONDO
PROP STYLIST DANIELLA MANGAKIS
LOCATION ELSEWHERE, CALIFORNIA

“I find that when I’m more relaxed, when I have a calm nervous system, I’m able to be more expressive in my sensuality.”

WAITING FOR THE END OF THE WORLD IN EL SALVADOR



For bitcoin maximalists and dissidents of the New Right, this small, troubled Central American dictatorship has become an incubator for a reactionary end times ideology. **BY SAM VENIS**

PERCHED ON A HILL

about halfway up El Boquerón Volcano in San Salvador, the Palestra House is an orange art deco mansion in the Spanish colonial style with three floors, six bedrooms, and a large infinity pool overlooking the San Salvador valley. It was originally conceived, among insiders, as a kind of cross between a Christian "network spirituality" church and a hacker house for an esoteric software project called Urbit—a sprawling start-up turned social network focused on the heady, quite literal goal of rebuilding the internet from scratch, started by the "dark elf" of so-called Dark Enlightenment, Curtis Yarvin.

"It was originally supposed to be like, I don't know, a biohacked based frog anon, bodybuilder-military cadre," says Jake Hamilton, a mid-30s polymath engineer and biohacker who lives at the Palestra House. Tanned with reddish skin and barbed Scots-Irish features, Hamilton finished college with a degree in philosophy, but after taking an online course with tech philosopher Nick Land on the philosophy of bitcoin in 2015, he changed his life's direction and started teaching himself to code: "The moment [Land] said, 'Bitcoin is monetary critique'...that by removing the need for a trusted third party, bitcoin develops an artificial mirror of ontology, like, I got it. I decided essentially on the spot that this is what it means to continue doing philosophy." After picking up some basic coding gigs while bartending in New York, Hamilton found his way to Urbit by way of Yarvin's writing, like many in the Palestra orbit. Then the pandemic hit. Along with a small crew of expats convinced of America's imminent collapse, he came to El Salvador in 2021 in search of a way out—or, as he calls it, a "crack" in the system ("Bitcoin is a crack, Central America is a crack, and El Salvador is the crack within the crack"). "There was a very specific and contrived and aggressive original notion, which did not really come to pass," he says, smiling and shrugging his hands. "It was the pandemic."

Like many of the most eccentric projects of the dissident right, the Palestra House first came to my attention online and specifically on Instagram from a New York writer who was dating one of the original members of the house. The rumor was that, on a recent visit, she'd had dinner with El Salvador's current president, Nayib Bukele, and that Yarvin was there with a right-wing scenester known online as Future Moldovan Citizen. Moldovan, as he's known socially, runs the event programming for a place called Sovereign House, a kind of de facto social club for right-wing grifters and burnout poets on Manhattan's Lower East Side. Which made me wonder: What did Dimes Square have to do with El Salvador and, particularly, with Yarvin? Was it a coincidence that the world's most famous monarchist—known for advocating that countries smash "the crappy governments we inherited from history" and replace them with joint-stock corporations run as family businesses—had allegedly been fraternizing with El Salvador's young president, a hyperonline upstart who'd recently arrested 80,000 people and changed the country's constitution to eliminate presidential term limits? When Bukele described himself on Twitter as "El Salvador's dictator CEO," was it an ironic LARP—an inside joke—or a nod to a practical political theory?

Judging by Bukele's tweets (his X bio is "Philosopher King"), what was happening in El Salvador suggested the latter. When he changed the constitution to adopt bitcoin as valid legal tender, he blasted a megaphone at the tech world that he was open to "new ideas" (also the name of his new political party). He courted crypto celebrities like Samson Mow and CZ, the billionaire founder of Binance. Bukele convinced a stablecoin provider called Tether to move its offices to San Salvador and build a tower in the heart of the city. And yet, despite his authoritarian style (or perhaps because of it), Bukele had a 90 percent approval rating in his country. He had control of all three branches of government and a firm handle on the gangs. His face was plastered on billboards across Central America. One poll even suggested he was more popular than the pope. "The Bukele model" had become an aspirational meme for leaders across the Latin American world. Donald Trump had dubbed him his favorite president.

Touching down in San Salvador on a tightly packed Airbus, I wanted to know how this all worked in practice. What happens when a network state stops being a fledgling political gambit and becomes the state itself? Was the Bukele model actually functional, as it seemed on the surface, or had he just dampened the sound of dissent?

BELOW Nestled in an upscale San Salvador neighborhood, Palestra House serves as a sort clubhouse/retreat center for expat technologists who dream of turning El Salvador into a hub for the world's accelerationists and techno-visionaries.

LEFT A statue of mysterious bitcoin founder Satoshi Nakamoto at the entrance to Bitcoin Beach.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY **SAM VENIS**

Of course, to understand El Salvador's transformation under Bukele, you have to understand its history of violence. Until about three years ago—when Bukele initiated a war on the gangs, rounding up close to 80,000 people and locking them in the megaprisons much reported in Western media—El Salvador was considered the most dangerous place in the world. Perhaps that's why my mother was terrified when I told her I was going on this trip.

The abridged version of Salvadoran Civil War history is that El Salvador was a victim of the Cold War. A late-'70s uprising in the countryside led to brutal suppression. The Soviets armed the Communist peasants; the Americans armed the suppressors—the government and other guerrilla anti-Communist forces. Common estimates of the total dead in this 13-year period range from 75,000 to 100,000, though the real numbers are likely higher.

Over 1 million Salvadorans fled the country during this period, mainly to Canada and the United States—and to Los Angeles in particular: nearly one in six Salvadorans from a country of 6 million people. There, some of them formed, or were recruited, into two primary gangs: Barrio 18 and Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13), both named after the L.A. neighborhoods where the gangs originated. But as the U.S. war on drugs began cresting in the early '90s, the State Department decided it was time to clean the American streets of foreign gangs. It negotiated an end to the civil war and started deporting refugees back to the country. Gang affiliations came with them.

Returning to a country ravaged by war and filled with military equipment, with no clear economic opportunities, the gangs began to recruit. In 2004, there were around 30,000 gang members; by 2012, it was 60,000; by 2022, 80,000 or more. In 2015, El Salvador's homicide rate reached its highest level since the civil war, with more than 6,650 homicides registered that year. Unlike the Mexican cartels, Salvadoran gangs are not primarily narcos: Their main sources of revenue are extortion and robbery. Which means that, in practice, virtually every person in El Salvador became absorbed into the orbit of the gangs in one way or another: for the wealthy, as a basic cost of doing business, like paying a water or electricity bill; for everyone else, as a constant source of fear.

This was the situation that Bukele inherited when he ran for mayor of San Salvador in 2015. From the start, his focus was transformation, both symbolic and material: changing the street names to wash the memory of the civil war and appointing family members to administrative positions. He put streetlights and video surveillance in territory controlled by the gangs. He started scholarship programs for young kids and began renovating San Salvador's downtown corridor. In 2017, Bukele was ousted from his party and then announced his intention to run for president under a new one, called Nueva Ideas. A prolific tweeter and social media star, he took to the internet to make his case, enlisting an army of bloggers, YouTubers, and internet trolls.

"I mean, politically, he's a genius," says Leonor Selva, a Salvadoran executive who advises organizations like the IMF and World Bank on navigating investment in the country. I met Selva at a coffee shop and coworking space in the city center. Like many of the upscale establishments in San Salvador, the café is hidden behind a large concrete wall covered in rolls of barbed wire, overseen by an armed security guard at the entrance. Just a few years ago, armed guards stood on nearly every corner of the city, Selva tells me, a "siege mentality."

Bukele won the presidency in 2019, and one of his core promises was that the gangs would be put under control. While he was mayor, he negotiated with the gangs to reduce the violence, like previous administrations had. "But the gangs got greedy and betrayed him," Selva says. The way the gangs negotiated, she continues, is that "whenever they wanted more money or something, they would up the homicides." This happened three times. The third time, in March 2022, the gangs murdered 87 people over a single weekend. Days later, Bukele initiated a nationwide state of emergency—an *estado de excepción*—and started rounding up the gangs, using tattoos as identifiers. According to some estimates, nearly 85,000 people are now in Salvadoran prisons, the vast majority there without trial (or even formal charges).

One thing Westerners take for granted, Selva says, is the government having a monopoly on violence: "For almost 50 years in this country, it didn't. What we had was political leadership that didn't want change, that were very comfortable with this stagnant dynamic." The problem, Selva says, is that the popularity that Bukele earned from cleaning up the country has a shelf life, and it's not possible to replicate that kind of sudden transformation in living standards. "I always say his challenge is that he has big dreams, but he's stuck with this small, unsophisticated country," Selva says. In 2024, El Salvador's GDP was just over $35 billion—about a 10th of CVS's annual revenue.

"All he has is the strategy of the nightclub," Selva says. Before entering politics, Bukele was very successful running a nightclub in San Salvador, and that's how he runs the country. "The way nightclubs work is that you spend a lot of money attracting people, making a lot of noise, bringing in the pretty girls," she says. "Because the one client you actually want to attract is a big whale that's gonna buy everyone's drinks." In practice, this has meant making flashy announcements: establishing bitcoin as legal tender, opening a tourism hub on the coast, announcing development of a new airport, reinstating the possibility for mining in the country, which had previously been banned. But the big whale hasn't come. "I mean, they come explore," Selva says. "It's not that it doesn't work. But they don't stay. They don't buy the bottle."

I'd heard something similar when I spoke to one of the other founders of the Palestra House, an ex-Urbit engineer named Philip Galebach—the son of Stephen Galebach, a deputy assistant at the Department of Justice during the Reagan administration and, in 2000, the lead on one of the largest IPOs in U.S. history. Along with the rest of their family, Phil and Stephen came to El Salvador in 2022 in search of a political context where leaders were actively working to apply new approaches. In the United States, it was nearly impossible to meet with high-level officials—and even if you did, creating meaningful change was

“We are back in the age of secret societies,” says one expat. And in El Salvador, “Yusef is our guy.”

THE WORDCEL IN CHIEF Salvadoran president Nayib Bukele’s younger brother Yusef serves as a conduit to El Salvador’s influential bitcoin expat community.

unlikely. But when Phil came to El Salvador, the impression was that you could get access to whoever you want. “Table stakes to get access in DC is $100 million,” Phil says, referencing his father’s conversations with DC consultants. “Table stakes to get access in El Salvador is almost nothing.... There’s only one degree of separation from the very top. Which is kinda fun.”

When the Galebachs arrived, they were joined by many other high-profile businesspeople, including CZ of Binance, Brian Armstrong of Coinbase, and a lot of top companies across both crypto and “normal” tech, like Google. Phil says, “You could throw a party, and, like, the exiled prince of Serbia would show up.” And so would the president’s brother Yusef Bukele, one of Nayib’s closest advisers. “But after a while, it became clear that [the Bukeles] weren’t actually able to implement a UAE-, Hong Kong–, Singapore-type system,” Phil continues. “I got a little tired of the gap between the talk and actually creating the necessary conditions for tech.”

Phil’s preferred metaphor for the Bukele model is a start-up. Bukele has been exceptional at top-of-funnel lead generation, and when new leads arrive, he’s great at qualifying them and providing access to the right people. The Bukeles have also made it possible for foreigners to draft legislation; “we were heavily involved with the digital asset bill that they passed,” Phil says. And another American in the Palestra orbit was responsible for writing the country’s new health bill. Bukele can pass these laws because he’s consolidated control over El Salvador’s political institutions. His brothers serve as gatekeepers, information funneling up from them to the top. But when it comes to execution—what you might think of as “API integration,” Phil says—the performance has been less than stellar. And running the country like a monarchy creates another problem: In an effort to consolidate power, the Bukeles have prioritized loyalists over competent people with divergent ideas. Phil mentions Stacy Herbert and Max Keiser, the so-called bitcoin power couple, who both serve as advisers to the Bukele administration. After getting into a shouting match with Herbert—and subsequently being blocked out of decision-making—Phil decided to leave the country in 2024. His family followed shortly thereafter. He’s now in Javier Milei’s Argentina—the “exact mirror image of El Salvador”—where bitcoin isn’t legal but everyone uses it. “I’ve had talks with one of Milei’s top advisers,” Phil continues. “They’re super interested in [network state] stuff.”

Hamilton and I are on our way out of the city, heading toward Bitcoin Beach—the hub of the country’s crypto scene—in a Ford Explorer. In the back seat are Matt Lizak, aka Deng, an ex-Urbit intern who helped organize the Palestra Forum, and Eleanor, aka Ellie, a British meme page admin turned oil trader who speaks perfect Russian and keeps being asked if she is a fed (which she denies, though she also asks me not to use her last name). “Nick Fuentes is definitely a fed, though,” Deng says. “Just think about how valuable that dataset would be... even from a sheer human resources perspective.”

One of the most shocking parts of being around people on the dissident right is learning how closely connected the highest reaches of power are with seemingly normal people. Fighting his way through one of San Salvador’s chaotic roundabouts, Hamilton says, “We used Balaji [Srinivasan] to connect Nayib [Bukele] with Elon [Musk]” a couple of years ago. “That was pretty cool.”

Hamilton explains that Srinivasan, the former CTO of Coinbase and the author of *The Network State*, was previously on the board of Urbit, so when the president wanted to connect with Musk, he asked someone from Urbit to make the link. “Ultimately, it was about nothing,” Hamilton says with a smirk. “Cross-promotion between El Salvador and Elon’s companies.... But we all had a small field day. Like...Urbit is the fucking Masons.” (He’s referring to the mysterious stonemason guild that’s contributed to the rise and fall of empires throughout history.)

The founding lore of Bitcoin Beach is that it was started after an anonymous bitcoiner donated about $1 million worth of bitcoin to help seed a local bitcoin economy in El Salvador. A California surfer named Mike Peterson, who moved there in the early 2000s, received the anonymous payment and went to work establishing a town where bitcoin could actually function as currency, from the boutique hotel to the butcher. He started paying local Salvadorans in bitcoin to clean up the beach and convincing local farmers to accept bitcoin payments for produce. They established an organization called the Bitcoin Beach Initiative to attract bitcoiners from around the world.

Today, about 3,000 people live around Bitcoin Beach, an area known as El Zonte. Located on the Pacific coast about an hour's drive from San Salvador, the beach is covered in ash black, volcanic sand with 10- to 12-foot waves perfect for surfing. The social centerpiece of the bitcoin scene is a biweekly farmers market, where people come to buy pupusas and wax candles in bitcoin. (You can also use cash or a credit card.) The Bitcoin Hardware Store sells cryptographic cold-storage wallets and everything you could need to mine bitcoin and store it, as well as trucker hats with slogans like End the Fed and a board game called HODL UP.

The question of whether El Salvador's experiment with bitcoin has been successful largely hinges on your impression of what it's aiming to achieve. Stories in Western media tend to emphasize that when Bukele started using El Salvador's treasury to buy bitcoin, he opened up his country's volatile finances to an even greater degree of instability. When the price of bitcoin dropped in 2022, critics pointed out that, purely as an investment, the policy had made no return. They argued that the wallet experiment—in which the government distributed about $30 in bitcoin to every Salvadoran citizen—had failed, since most people didn't continue using bitcoin after the original money was spent. Critics further claimed that, in the process of establishing El Salvador as a bitcoin state, Bukele had reduced his country's viability as a recipient of traditional financial assistance, such as loans from the IMF and World Bank. His detractors argued that El Salvador was simply positioning itself as another tax haven, like Panama or the Bahamas, and, in the process, courting investors who mostly take and don't leave much behind.

As you might expect, insiders like Hamilton see it differently. First, although the price of bitcoin did drop in 2022, at the time I was in the country, the price of bitcoin had reached all-time highs of about $123,000 per bitcoin, meaning the overall value of the treasury holdings had increased more than 100 percent. Bukele had also managed to secure a loan from the IMF worth $1.4 billion, despite making concessions to do so, like making private-sector bitcoin acceptance voluntary. While national adoption of bitcoin had been minimal (less than 9 percent of Salvadorans reported bitcoin usage in 2024), the project had created a spate of positive externalities, Hamilton argues, from bitcoin tourism and charity work to the sheer value of putting El Salvador on the map.

For Hamilton—who has netted an eight-figure profit from various crypto projects in the last few years and uses the proceeds to fund biotech and cryptography start-ups—the real value of the bitcoin experiment is philosophical. (He describes himself alternately as a "Heideggerian bitcoiner" and a "market spiritualist with Yarvinic leanings.") It's less about tax havens and bubble manufacturing, he says, as crypto is often perceived in America, and more about building the infrastructure of a parallel world—one that can defend against the looming uncertainty and political chaos of the present. "Cryptography is the inverse power of surveillance," Hamilton says to me quietly as we walk along the volcanic beach, preparing to swim. He points out that, in El Salvador, *crypto* is often considered a dirty word, representing the American scam culture of shitcoins. Bitcoin is seen as safe and secure.

Hamilton takes off his shirt to reveal a square tan line on his bicep where his nicotine patch had once been. Ellie is running headlong into the ocean. Deng is rubbing in sunscreen that refuses to

CRYPTO PARADISE About 3,000 expats live on or around Bitcoin Beach, located in the surf town of El Zonte, 26 miles away from San Salvador, where bitcoin can be used for day-to-day purchases.

Among many in El Salvador, *crypto* is seen as a dirty word, representing the scam culture of shitcoins.

dissolve despite vigorous kneading. "That's why I work on Urbit and biotech at the same time," Hamilton continues. "The part of crypto that's cyberpunk—that's the only part of this network state concept that has any value." Currently, he's funding a biotech lab in Austin, Texas, which is researching the mechanics of intercellular communication.

If you're unfamiliar with these terms, it might sound like another confusing bag of neologisms. But underneath the jargon is a tech stack designed to protect against the encroachment of tyrannical governments and corporations: a kind of prepper tech for political polarization. You can think about it this way: Currently, our identities on the internet—and, frankly, IRL—are provided by third parties that give entitlements to certain rights. A driver's license entitles us to drive in certain places. An Instagram ID allows us to easily sign in to certain websites. But what if those third parties suddenly decide that you're an enemy and are no longer entitled to the rights those services provide? What if, like Edward Snowden, you reveal state secrets? Or you share content that violates a platform's terms and conditions? Say, a cutting critique of Israel or a stray nipple? If it's a private company, you lose your credentials and all the rights that come with it—from speaking to your friends to building your business—with no real form of recourse. If it's a state, you lose everything, from all your assets to your right to travel to your right to have a bank account.

That's the focus of Urbit and some of the other projects that Hamilton funds. Given the trajectory of world affairs right now, many technologists believe that more people will inevitably become "thought criminals" as polarization increases. And in that scenario, as states become more desperate to retain control, what will you do to defend yourself? How will you prevent your money from getting stolen? Your identity from being hijacked? Your access to the internet from being revoked? How will you keep your opinions guarded when all the software providers share everything with the state?

The answer to these questions isn't hypothetical. It's playing out right now all over the world. It's happening in Palestine and Ukraine with AI devoted to target elimination. It's happening in China with its social credit system. It's happening in the United States with companies like Palantir creating "social listening" devices inspired by (and named after!) the surveillance monstrosity in Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight*. It happened in Canada when the freedom truckers were debanked.

I ask Hamilton what this has to do with biotech. His eyes bulge, and he swallows a deep breath.

"I mean, eventually, we have to be able to replace our immune system with something artificial and smart and market-connected," he says. Given an inevitable future of increased chemical exposure, extreme climate events, and toxin diffusion; declining immune function; reduced vaccine effectiveness; and growing resistance to other pharmaceuticals, Hamilton says, "we're heading toward a biological context in which natural immune systems are no longer sufficient.... That's not satanic. It's not evil. It *is* an evolutionary jump. And so if we can figure out things that Pfizer [and the other mainstream pharmaceutical companies] are systematically incapable of seeing... that's how we prepare to win back. That's the plan. We win back."

He runs into the ocean at full speed while I sit alone smoking a cigarette. The black sand wraps around my toes, and I can feel the salty air on my teeth. After an hour of swimming, we walk through town, which is filled with new construction projects, and take pictures of the campy bitcoin paraphernalia. A plastic garbage can with the bitcoin *b*. A garage door with a poster that says Fix the Money, Fix the World.

This network state concept, Hamilton says, is not about exiting the system to prove you can. It's about creating alternative social systems, companies, and contexts capable of functioning outside the gaze of dominant systems. "Crypto itself is the network state," he says. "But so is El Salvador, which has a traditional passport and a traditional leader." From Próspera in Honduras to the Freedom Cities that Trump plans to create in America, all these "zones," Hamilton says, are part of a "sort of qualitatively heterogeneous, like, Frankensteinian, experimental, accelerationist frontier." It's totally unclear right now, he says, how "that is going to function as some sort of cohesive juridical whole," but it starts with creating footholds like El Salvador and working with leaders like Bukele and his brother Yusef, "who's a total wordcel" (like an incel but for words). "We are back in the age of secret societies," Hamilton says. And in El Salvador, "Yusef is our guy."

Eventually, we stumble on an outdoor gym with a silverish statue toward the rear: a computer hacker, sitting cross-legged, on a laptop. "Oh cool, a Satoshi statue," Deng says, referring to the anonymous founder of bitcoin. From the side, the statue flashes in the sun, its layers of reflective metal stacked like teeth in an industrial shredder. From the front, the layers are suspended like dominoes, spaced out in a row. From the side, the computer hacker is tapping on his laptop. From the front, he's invisible. You can see right through to the beach.

We are standing on the second-floor balcony of the National Palace in San Salvador, slanted beams of sun pouring over the Roman columns and marble floors. A tall man in a checkered button-down is explaining to me why when a person is racist, it often means they're stupid. "It takes a certain IQ level to be able to differentiate between different traits," he says, and low-IQ people tend to view everyone of a particular race as intrinsically the same. Which is stupid, he adds, and that's why racism is a good proxy for intelligence. "But, to me," he says, "it's more of, like, is it gutter racism or the sophisticated Somalian racism of memorizing a thousand different clans that's almost, like, xenophilic."

The man in the checkered shirt is Benjamin Braddock, editor-at-large of *IM-1776*, an online geopolitics and culture magazine for the dissident right. Like nearly half the guests at the National Palace, Braddock has flown into town specially for the Palestra Forum, an annual meeting of the minds that's become a kind of pilgrimage for people adjacent to Urbit. The other half of the attendees are local: Salvadoran officials and friends of the Bukele family and American technologists who recently moved to El Salvador. Last year, when Yarvin addressed the conference, he started his address with a shout-out to Bukele: "Hello, San Salvador…. It's great to be here in the only monarchy in the Western Hemisphere."

This year's presentations start with a lecture by a man named David Rivard, an American ex-marine in his late 70s, who came to El Salvador for the first time in the early 2000s, after an earthquake killed nearly a thousand people. On the trip, Rivard met Armando Bukele, Nayib's father, who was then a physicist and businessman, and the pair became close friends and colleagues. When Nayib came to power, Rivard says, he asked Rivard to move to El Salvador and help. And now Rivard is the head of El Salvador's Agency for the Development and Design of the Nation, tasked with recruiting foreign workers, attracting infrastructure financing, and reforming the Salvadoran agricultural system. Currently, El Salvador imports around 93 percent of its vegetables, and its primary growth crop is sugar cane, typically sprayed with extensive pesticides and herbicides. The result is that, in regions of El Salvador focused on agricultural production, roughly one in four men suffers from chronic kidney disease.

"This is the country, guys," Rivard says, addressing the room. "This is the country to establish roots. We have agency here. Your craziest ideas can go through proper vetting of truth and applicability…. I want you to remember that this is the place where the leadership is aligned, the stars are aligned. That means greater resources, greater opportunities for us all."

The other talks are more esoteric in nature, but the general vibe is triumphant: Bolstering power after a decisive win, MAGA goes global and it starts right here. A German entrepreneur, who runs an online course for men focused on "mastering the new skills of civic defense," speaks about the world's current "rebirth window" between the parasitic systems of the past and the dawning new age. A Canadian backpacker turned YouTube star speaks about his journey from suicidal drug user to Christ-led philanthropist—he now builds homes in Central America for poor villagers, adding lofts that they can rent out on Airbnb. A millennial mining executive, whose start-up focuses on lowering the cost of explorative drilling for precious metals and other minerals, speaks about integrating software into the geophysics stack. He doesn't have a contract with the government (yet), he says, but he *is* interested. His presence at the conference seems pointed. In December 2024, Bukele posted on X that "God placed a gigantic treasure underneath our feet": gold deposits worth roughly $3 trillion.

So here was the secret society—as Hamilton described the group—the Freemasons emerged from the shadows of the liberal woke regime. One person is running a support group for Canadian "freedom fighters." Two venture capitalists have flown in from Dallas, representing a fund that they described as a "based VC." A bitcoiner from Miami is speaking about creating "crypto citadels" in the hills. A lumbering man with a thick, red neck like he's smoked too many cigarettes introduces himself as Elijah Schaffer, a Christian nationalist "journalist" with nearly a million X followers. He keeps making comments about the Zionist conspiracy, and I later learn that he was banned from Australia for attacking Indigenous people. Schaffer is joined by a guy named Edward Szall, another Christian nationalist and so-called journalist, known for a documentary called *Died Suddenly*, about the dangers of the Covid-19 vaccine and the Great Reset conspiracy theory.

"I really think that this is the apocalypse," says Yusef Bukele. He also believes that the Golden Age is "not that far off" and that it will start here in El Salvador.

* * *

As the conference breaks for lunch, I think about something else Hamilton said earlier in the week: that the right is not prepared for power. "It doesn't know how to balance idealism and practicality with the logistics of maintaining a coalition," he says. "Knowing how to actually govern." And yet, in the shadow of Trump 2.0, he says, these are people suddenly "turning around the ship of American imperialism." Braddock mentions that he is being vetted for a position in the U.S. State Department. Szall was a White House correspondent for Mike Lindell's media network, LindellTV. Ellie was asked to make deals with the Bukeles on behalf of the British Tories. Meritocratic ticket punching counts for little in this world—no one cares about your Harvard or Oxford degree. Instead, it's Twitter University turned imperial control strategy: making it up as you go along, no idea too outlandish so long as it involves propping up the regime.

Around this time, I notice a skinny guy with a mustache, dressed in all black, surrounded by a phalanx of bodyguards. The energy in the room shifts as he sits down alone toward the back of the room, writing in an unlined notebook. I know who he is right away. I recognized his face. It's the president's brother Yusef Bukele.

I tell him I'm writing a story for *Playboy* and ask if he'd speak with me. Within minutes, Palestra's founder, Mike McCluskey (who goes by Clusk), descends to make sure Yusef knows I'm a journalist. An older Salvadoran woman, connected to the government, comes and sits down too. I joke that I'd been sent to El Salvador to make *Playboy* based. Yusef smiles and agrees to let me record him. "It's very dystopic where the world is heading," he says. As a society, "we're almost completely assimilated…. People don't really live anymore."

This word, *assimilated*, he repeats multiple times throughout our conversation. I haven't heard it from anyone else; I wonder if it is a translation issue. It seems to mean something like total mindless absorption into the will of the machine. “Nondeveloped countries are now below replacement rates,” Yusef says. “Why? Because before you had to develop so that modern culture could insert itself into the people. But now everyone’s getting assimilated in one shot. And with AI, it will just be faster.”

Earlier in the week, Selva told me that Yusef and the other three Bukele brothers function as the president’s inner circle, participating in most major strategic decision-making. In 2022, they were the target of an internal corruption investigation called Operation Cathedral (coincidentally, or not, named after one of Yarvin’s core theories). The investigation was killed after Bukele installed a new attorney general. Although he doesn’t have an official position, Yusef was instrumental in El Salvador’s adoption of bitcoin, and he also set up Rivard’s agency for national development. Unlike the president, who’s known for his love of the spotlight, Yusef tends to be media-shy; his online presence is a string of philosophical quotes and screenshots from 20th-century films. His Wikipedia page calls him a businessman and an economist (though he has only an undergraduate degree), but Selva opts to describe him instead as “the artist of the family.”

Our conversation is held in perfect English, and it ranges across topics: the decline of smoking rates in Paris (which he disapproves of); the work of Éric Rohmer, the French filmmaker, and Jean-Luc Godard, his favorite of the French New Wave. We speak about elevated screen times, Big Pharma, the German poet Novalis, and the Salvadoran oligarchy trying to “squish [competition] using their connections and political power.” The event is starting to wind down, so I walk with Yusef toward the exit of the palace. Palestra House is throwing a party, so Yusef offers me a ride in his personal convoy. Two bodyguards—previously hostile-seeming and mean—usher us into an SUV parked in front of the building, opening the door with a smile. The truck begins to cut through the busy rush-hour streets, past the brand-new mega-library donated by China and the central market filled with chickens and fava beans. We pass the American embassy—the largest in the world, used for anti-Communist operations, then for anti-drug-trafficking—and a children’s play zone across the street, poetically named Dreamland.

I ask him how he got involved with Palestra, and he explains that most of them he met on X. He speaks in a matter-of-fact tone as if he were reciting a grocery list. That’s where he met Clusk and Moldovan. That’s where he met Dasha Nekrasova, the cohost of the *Red Scare* podcast. That’s where he met Yarvin, too, whom he spoke with last year during the Palestra Forum. So here was the link, I realize: the Dark Enlightenment in the Golden Triangle. Dimes Square in the San Salvador valley. It is still unclear whether the dissident right shaped politics for Nayib. I’d have to ask him to know for sure. But there is no doubt that they reached him by proxy. Yusef was the plug: El Salvador’s wordcel in chief.

Back at the Palestra House, I stand with Yusef overlooking the valley, the sharp peak of Las Pavas visible after a torrential rain. “I really think that this is the apocalypse,” he says. “Initial stages could probably last 100 years or 200.... I’m not saying there’s going to be a war and everyone will die. But it’s the assimilation.” He says he also “believe[s] that the Golden Age is not that far off” and that there’s good reason to think it will start here in El Salvador.

“There are several signs, several synchronicities,” Yusef continues. One is the legend of Topiltzin. He is referring to a Toltec priest-king said to have dispelled the traditions of the past and opposed human sacrifice during his reign, a story later woven into Aztec lore. Topiltzin united his people and supposedly settled in El Salvador to usher in an age of wisdom (though the record is divided). Then he went missing, and the legend said he’d eventually return. Yusef says that Topiltzin was white-skinned and bearded and that he landed in El Salvador on a wooden ship. It is clear who Yusef has in mind. I wonder if he knows the other half of the legend: That when Hernán Cortés showed up in Mesoamerica, he took advantage of his white skin and bearded face to pretend he was Topiltzin, using the deception to murder the Aztecs.

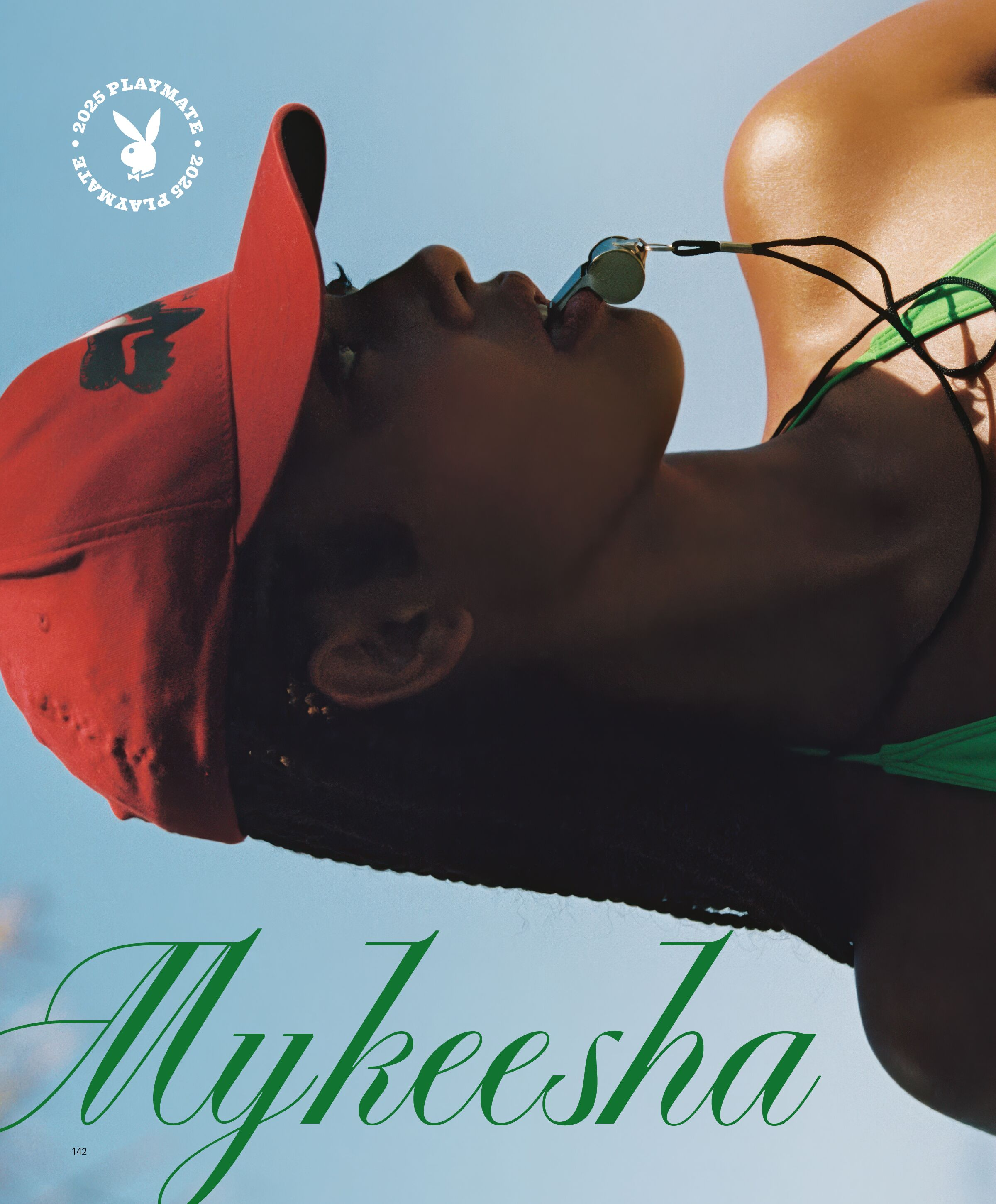
THE BITCOIN
HARDWARE STORE
Follow us @tbhs_sv

WHERE TRENDS GO, MERCH FOLLOWS The Bitcoin Hardware Store sells crypto mining supplies, bitcoin-themed board games, and End the Fed trucker hats.

“It’s written that there was always going to be a place—even during the apocalypse—there’s always going to be a place where you’ll be able to worship God,” Yusef says. *He sounds like a Bond villain*, I think to myself. “It could just be a bias, but I see [El Salvador] as the only place that it can be built, some type of ark where humanity survives,” Yusef says. “At least here, I can do [something about it]. In other places, I wouldn’t be able to.”

People start arriving for the party, and Yusef decides to leave. Hamilton tells me he is ordering from “Pepe burger” and walks off with a smirk. Tomorrow, the group is heading to the Bukeles’ country house, but journalists aren’t invited. A tall Salvadoran named Herbert Esmahan, with slicked hair and a tight leather jacket, is speaking about how, when he gives television interviews, he’s filled with the Holy Spirit. Supposedly, he’s next in line for president.

All this talk of apocalypse has me thinking about acceleration. What we’re heading toward, Hamilton said to me earlier in the week, is splinter civilizations: “The systems are so moribund and un-intervenable.... There are so many systems right at the edge of collapse or decay.... That what we’re seeing with crypto, with network states, all the stuff that tech elites talk about, it’s a flight response—the intelligence in the system preparing to flee the body. There is no such thing as ruling, in a time of the great crisis of the species, without having to make decisions that are monstrous. To think anything else is childish.” Hamilton says, “It could happen here,” meaning El Salvador. “It’s already happening in Israel. We are not prepared for the inevitable convulsions of the coming decades.” It is hard to disagree.



2025 PLAYMATE

Mykeesha

FOR MISS AUGUST **MYKEESHA NELSON**, LIFE HAS BEEN ONE LONG FLIRT WITH CHANCE AND CHARM.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY **MEGAN BATSON**

REC
BATT
AUTO SHUT OFF
MICROCASSETTE RECORDER
PEARLCORDER SD2
2 SPEED
12min
24min
OLYMPUS OPTICAL CO. LTD

“A good 80 percent of people who text me don’t get a reply—at least not within the first three days,” Mykeesha says, laughing, with a charming bluntness. The Australian has 25 unread messages on her phone during this interview, a digital pile-up that reflects her fundamental interest in what’s new or next. “I see it and get distracted,” the 28-year-old says, though the real issue emerges later: “I get so bored easily.”

Restlessness has defined her trajectory from Perth to London to her current Hollywood Boulevard apartment. Born in London but raised in Australia, she embodies perpetual motion, unable to embrace stillness. Her move to London happened by accident. She got a paycheck, was browsing tickets for a holiday, and says she “accidentally bought the one-way ticket.” Eight years later, post-Covid-19 London “got a bit shit,” so she paid for an American visa and declared, “Now I have to go.”

To be fair, acting on impulse may be genetic for Mykeesha. “My mom randomly picked up and left home when she was 16,” she says. “She moved to Brixton, then Camden and was on the tube one night when my dad first saw her. He was enthralled and left his friends to follow my mom off the train and walk her home. The next week, he picked up all his things and moved into her house in London.”

She’ll always hold a soft spot for London, but Perth holds special meaning since it’s where Mykeesha grew up: “It’s so different from anywhere else in the world. It’s the most isolated city, which is very freeing. People don’t care what you do.” It’s this atmosphere that leads to Mykeesha getting naked at music festivals. “It’s happened more than once, always in Perth,” she says, laughing. “Everyone cheers you on. It’s a little thing, for like a second.”

Her wild streak comes with complications, particularly in her dating life. “I know how to attract crazy,” she says, sighing. “Probably because I’m crazy? People who will do the wildest things, and I’ll go along with it.” Her ideal man would be someone nice and funny but, crucially, would tell her when to dial it back a little. “When I was younger, it was a good thing,” Mykeesha says. “Now I need someone to tell me to calm down, especially when I drink.”

Her energy requires constant outlets. When friends—her primary source of satisfaction—aren’t available, she’ll disappear into solo projects like building elaborate LEGO cars for an entire day, ignoring calls. Still, she craves connection, lighting up when friends check in or when her brutally honest best friend Neema calls her out. “She yelled at me when we were in London because I didn’t go out,” Mykeesha says, smiling.

The perpetual motion continues in L.A., where she’s been figuring out her next move. Someone told her, “Don’t change being crazy.” This is advice she questions but secretly treasures, knowing that her chaos, while sometimes problematic, is who she is. —**SEAN EVANS**

OF THE DOLPHIN
KEN DAVIS

What's something people assume about you that's totally wrong?

Something that people assume is that I am 24/7 wild and crazy. I'm actually really quiet in my own space, like dead silent. I talk to myself a lot.

What drew you to the *Playboy* world?

Growing up we were always watching *The Girls Next Door*. I feel like this shoot is living out my childhood.

What scent turns you on instantly?

Honestly…sweat. No, I'm joking, not sweat. I love the scent I wear, which is Viktor & Rolf Flowerbomb. And weirdly, that's my mom's favorite perfume. *[Laughing]* I'm sorry, Mom.

What would we learn about you by going through your trash?

What you would learn about me by going through my trash is that I have a severe coke addiction—I have a severe Coca-Cola addiction.

What's the most intimate thing someone could do for you that doesn't involve touching?

The most intimate thing that someone could do for me that does not involve touching would probably be to have a mustache. I love mustaches so much.

If your mood right now were a piece of lingerie, describe it.

If my mood right now was a piece of lingerie, it'd be like those little, edible candy lingerie.

What's something you do only when you're totally alone?

I am always talking to myself. And picking my nose, I guess.

Have you ever flirted your way out of something?

What was it? I haven't flirted my way out of something, but I feel like I've flirted my way through life. Always. Get whatever you want. Pull a tit out.

What's something you've never told your parents but would tell us right now?

I tell my parents absolutely everything. Everything. It's actually concerning.

What do you become after midnight?

I become a deranged insomniac who can't form one sentence at all.

What are you the most passionate about?

I think I'm the most passionate about looking after my friends and family. That's everything.

What does being a Playmate mean to you?

I think it's really exciting. It's exciting to show people that I'm not just crazy, that I can actually be sexy because I'm, like, the least sexy person ever.

Tell us a secret.

Does that have to be saucy? A secret about me is I'm, like, really good at kayaking, like, ridiculously good at kayaking. It's actually so scary. I kayak so far, so quickly. Straight line. Just crazy.

What's your relationship to nature, and how has it shaped your relationship to yourself?

My relationship with nature is terrible. I hate the wilds. I grew up in Australia, so…I hate it. I grew up in the outback, and it was disgusting. Everything was out to kill me, so now I don't like going outside. I love the city. But this is nice, I guess.

What's your alter ego's name?

Mandy. My alter ego's name is Mandy. She is a ho, and she loves to party, and so does my normal self. But my normal self can keep it in their pants. Mandy is crazy.

You're walking into a room full of icons. What's your entrance song and outfit?

If I was walking into a room of icons, my outfit would be something mesh. I love wearing mesh or lace. My entrance song would be… Let's go with the Australian anthem. Why not? Make it interesting. Everyone's going to look at me and be like, "What the fuck?"

STYLING BY **ELEN DALI**. HAIR AND MAKEUP BY **MARIAH MELANIE**.

SEROW

Under the D

LATE-STAGE HEDONISM MEETS LATE-STAGE CAPITALISM AT A CASTLE IN FRANCE.

BY DANIEL PINCHBECK

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MIO SCHWEIGER

isco Clitoris

I STOOD ON THE SIDE of a large rectangular plastic mat with 40 others, men and women of various ages with a general high standard of physical beauty. We were all utterly naked, about to be blindfolded and slathered in coconut oil, then sent to writhe together without knowing whose body or body part we would rub up against as we crawled, flailed, and squirmed across the tarp. Among those ready for this hour-long exploration of "Liquid Love"—we had won an in-house lottery to participate—were a cadre of Berlin nightlife habitués, somatic bodyworkers, former South African bank presidents, crypto millionaires, yogis, and others of unknown provenance, accompanied by a live DJ and tuba player.

The blond Ukrainian woman facilitator warned us—insisted, almost sternly—this was not a sexual experience. We were instructed not to engage with genitalia, not to plunge our fingers or toes into any accidentally available bodily orifices. The Liquid Love workshop was meant to bring us back to the innocent freedom of childhood, she reminded us.

Suddenly, it was time to put on our blindfolds and enter the ring. Like a sightless protozoa, I plunged forward, trying to avoid impure thoughts or kinky misdeeds as I met and crawled through a pulsing tangle of torsos, hands, calves, stomachs, and fingers, noting my automatic preference for feminine softness over masculine hairiness, feeling like an amoeba squirming together with its just-hatched pack.

It was Friday afternoon at the 16th-century château nestled in the French countryside, an hour from Paris by train, where some 400 people had gathered that weekend for Hedoné, a woman-led movement aimed at sexual liberation, based on a philosophy of "ethical hedonism," with shades of Burning Man and dollops of hippie idealism. Hedoné was born in 2015 at a birthday party in the form of a modern bacchanal and art performance, led by Lola Toscano and her friends in Berlin. Since then, the collective has grown into a thriving movement, regularly occupying German castles, French châteaus, Berlin nightclubs, and Mexican haciendas, assembling a global community for orgiastic celebrations of pleasure, beauty, and excess.

For Toscano, 43, Hedoné's founder, the movement began with her burden of childhood sexual repression and Catholic body shame. "Tiny village, big hell," she says of growing up in southern Spain, where her mother was the first to divorce in her village and gossip ruled every interaction. When, as a child, she was caught exploring her sexuality with a local boy, she was meant to feel ashamed. At the precocious age of nine, she discovered Freud's *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* and struggled through it with a dictionary: "That book showed me I was a normal human being. It healed me." The insight became the seed for Hedoné—a space where sex is not hidden in basement dungeons but celebrated openly with flowers, vibrant colors, and feminine aesthetics and consent protocols.

Toscano is unapologetic about Hedoné as both laboratory and sanctuary: "You can be doing all the right things, be conscious, and be sexy at the same time." She and her team carefully curate the events with application forms and dress codes, not just to maintain atmosphere but to build trust and inclusivity. Hedoné is now seeking a permanent locale with negotiations underway to buy a castle on the French-Italian border near Monaco as its home. Funds will come from a combination of wealthy benefactors and by selling annual memberships. Membership will offer access not only to events and residencies at the castle but also to a digital platform with music, educational content, and erotic media. For Toscano, the stakes go far beyond spectacle: "Many women never have an orgasm because they don't dare to explore. What we create here is a laboratory for the mind—to find your kink, to find yourself."

Earlier that afternoon, in my interminable efforts to find my kink as well as myself, I joined a tantra workshop, led by a bearded warlock in Persian robes who called himself a "magician of discovery." He guided participants through a long meditation about roots going through rocks and golden light shooting up the spine, insisting we were "living bridges" between earth and heaven. Soon everyone was eye-gazing in silence, then whispering, "I see you, I hear you, I love you, I trust you," to whatever stranger sat across from them. The climax was a sorting game based on "love languages" with people grouping themselves as if auditioning for roles in a relationship self-help video. The rhetoric was all about authenticity—"not even love, but authenticity is the strongest force." I found the effect close to an amateur theater workshop given a New Age overlay.

But I didn't rush to make a judgment. At the event, I spoke with many people who said their first Hedoné marked a sharp dividing line in their lives. Shantih, a 32-year-old sexological bodyworker from Ireland, described her initiation as nothing less than a turning point: "I felt this huge permission—to be free, to luxuriate in beauty without guilt, to live the full spectrum of myself." Coming from Ireland, she realized she carried a scarcity mindset, but the festival helped her break that spell: "When I came home, I started valuing myself differently. That permission was very healing."

In a women's temple, she watched half the room "evoke the sensual goddess, total feminine embodiment—beauty, sexiness, playfulness" and said it catalyzed a deeper exploration of eroticism: "Our erotic energy is vital to our overall well-being. Having a conscious, loving, shame-free relationship with [that energy] is essential for our evolutionary journey." She sees these festivals as laboratories for the future, where people explore new ways of being that can ripple outward, changing more repressive cultures back home.

One of the striking things about Hedoné, many participants noted, is that it is run by women. Feminine mastery shapes the event's ambience, as well as its particular vision

In my interminable efforts to find my kink as well as myself, I joined a tantra workshop, led by a bearded warlock who called himself a "magician of discovery."

of fully consensual sexual liberation. An Israeli woman I spoke with, who left a career in the military and high-level corporate life to pursue art and sensual community after attending her first Hedoné, put it bluntly: "In tantra worlds run by men, there is always a power game—they want control. They want access to women's bodies. Here it feels safer, lighter, playful, but also more serious somehow. There is no pressure. That's because the founders are women."

An older Italian woman who runs a healing center framed it in political terms. For her, Hedoné was not just about intimacy but about who holds power in a collapsing world: "There needs to be more women in power. I'm sorry, but men keep doing the same shit over and over again.… Hedoné is important because it opens people's minds, it gives alternatives, it breaks with the system. It feels different because it comes from women."

One participant noted that Hedoné sometimes felt like a "flashback to the '80s" but with less aggression and anguish, more art and acceptance. David, a French-Algerian jeweler and chef, who has cooked for the gatherings, said he took the community "seriously" in a way he never did with similar projects, praising the "vibes" even while critiquing the plastic decor. What's clear is that Hedoné's trust-based social architecture is not a happy accident but a consequence of female leadership.

AT 59, I don't have much left on my bucket list, but I confess that fully participating in a series of orgies as part of a loving community remains something I seek—as ardently as a medieval nun might yearn for communion with the divine. I tend to agree with Allen Ginsberg, who told *Playboy* in 1969: "Life should be ecstasy. We need lifestyles of ecstasy and social forms appropriate to whatever ecstasy is available for whoever wants it. Beyond man's natural ecstasy is total serenity and tranquility: cessation of desire, which the Buddhists talk of, which is liberation from grasping and craving." Before I can reach that serenity, however, I first need to experience the ecstasy to its fullest.

My journey to this point has been circuitous. I was a nerdy teenager with scoliosis who felt underappreciated by women into my 20s, then had conventional monogamous relationships before discovering polyamory at Burning Man in my late 30s. After becoming something of a counterculture celebrity through best-selling books on psychedelic shamanism and prophecies, I temporarily became the scene's alpha male with women wanting to connect with me after my talks and readings. What seemed at first like a wondrous gift soon became an addiction.

I came of age in the 1990s New York media world, where the bad behavior of powerful men like Harvey Weinstein and Charlie Rose was common knowledge in my circles—and almost expected. Unfortunately, I carried some old patterns into the psychedelic world, where people were supposedly becoming more conscious. In my efforts to face my shadow, I made a public Facebook confession in 2017, naively seeking redemption. Instead I got canceled by the unforgiving "outrage machine" of social media.

Since then, I've been experientially and philosophically investigating the riddle of human sexuality, intimacy, and Eros. At Tamera, a Portuguese community founded by Germans who tried to correct the flaws of the utopian 1960s counterculture that led to failure, I explored their radical redesign of relationship models through transparent "love networks" and exhaustive Forum circles where members recount every intimate interaction.

I've also attended three workshops with the International School of Temple Arts (ISTA), the controversial neo-tantra school influenced by Osho's teachings. Osho, also known as Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, was an Indian spiritual teacher and controversial guru who combined Eastern mysticism with Western ideas of freedom, meditation, and sexuality, founding a global movement in the 1970s and '80s that eventually collapsed in scandal, as depicted in the Netflix series *Wild Wild Country*. ISTA's intense weeklong experiences—featuring nakedness, group practices, sacred spot massage, and spins of the "wheel of consent"—aim to break down inhibitions and support sexual as well as personal coherence. ISTA recently underwent a restructuring and updated its accountability protocols after scandals involving teacher-student sexual dynamics and alleged sexual assault. Essentially, ISTA had no formal rules around facilitators and participants having sex, believing in the sovereign choices of all adults. But a number of participants spoke up about their experiences, testifying to intense power dynamics that supported male patterns of abuse. ISTA states that they are currently in an experimental phase where its protocol is no sexual interaction between facilitators and participants.

Both despite and because of my personal travails—and all of the chaos we see around us in the world—I remain fascinated by how we might evolve better models for love, sex, and intimacy. Traditional structures are failing us: Adults globally are having less sex, and women are furious at men, while men struggle with epidemic loneliness and reactionary rage. Neither dating apps nor organic meetings seem to work anymore. The right-wing tradwife movement seems an elaborate kayfabe. In reality, relations between the sexes are not just stagnating; they are degenerating.

Personally, I agree with Toscano that we need more, and better, erotic liberation, if this can be done in a humane and compassionate way. One of the pleasures of the festival was the profusion of naked flesh, as handsome men and gorgeous women walked around the castle and splashed in the pool wearing no, or minimal, clothing. Another pleasure was the incredible care people gave to their costumes, with different days dedicated to certain colors, promoting a general vibe of psychedelic excess. When I am around a lot of nudity, I find, instead of feeling more craving, my nervous system relaxes. I remember how artificial our current urban life is, which keeps flesh covered and throws us into little rectangular concrete boxes so we will stay repressed and sublimating to function as productive units in a technofeudalist megamachine.

This iteration of Hedoné was a first collaboration with a new community, Astral Plan, launched by Damián Aratohn, the production manager for Hedoné Paris. Astral Plan incorporates sensuality but focuses more on the exploration of consciousness and altered states. This includes workshops on entity encounters in lucid dreams, dark retreats, and mantra chanting, as well as discussions around psychedelics like mushrooms, ketamine, LSD, and DMT.

One focus of the workshops was the recent discovery made by the Russian-born psychonaut Danny Goler, a former Israeli soldier now based in Los Angeles. Goler

claims to have undertaken more than 7,000 DMT journeys. According to Goler, when people smoke DMT and peer into the diffraction pattern projected against a wall by a 650-nanometer red laser, they consistently report seeing coherent, matrix-like geometric symbols. Goler calls these Codes of Reality. He considers it evidence that reality is computationally rendered—that we live in a simulation, in other words. This idea has become wildly popular in tech circles, featured in the work of Nick Bostrom and parroted by Elon Musk and other tech leaders. Lasers were set up at the château so that participants could test Goler's thesis for themselves, with a few reporting seeing the hidden code. My personal attempts with this have so far not borne fruit.

In his talk, Goler described direct encounters with entities and futuristic technological instruments during past DMT trips. At one point, he said a capsule appeared in his living room, opening like a "space-age pod" to reveal menus, gloves, and VR-style interfaces: "Every single time I smoked DMT, this thing would appear.... It was as real as I can see you right now." The beings he met often communicated in what he called "pure meaning"—rapid exchanges of insight rather than words—and sometimes acted like gatekeepers, refusing to answer direct questions with anything more than "not enough DMT." Goler's popularity represents a trend in transformational communities. People seek experiential techniques to attain immediate gnosis for themselves. They don't want to just contemplate ideas from visionaries like Terence McKenna or Wim Hof. They want to immediately field-test them.

The "dissociadelic," ketamine, often used as a horse tranquilizer as well as a substitute for anesthesia, seemed the favorite substance at the event. One morning, an Italian friend of mine who was in the process of exploring his bisexuality led a breathwork ceremony in which participants were encouraged to augment their rapid-fire panting with their personal stash of "vitamin K." This breathwork is a modality for altering consciousness developed by the Czech LSD researcher Stanislav Grof, after the U.S. government made LSD illegal in the 1960s. Grof learned that certain breathing patterns—close to hyperventilating—easily lead to altered or visionary states.

As the breathwork started, I snorted an accidentally large pile of the fluffy powder. I found myself, for the first time in many years, dissolving fully into a delectable K hole.

I am a fan of K. I find it both highly strange and very relaxing, good for connecting with people psychically while detaching emotionally and with a manageable duration—though it causes addiction and destruction for some. As the breathwork started, I snorted an accidentally large pile of the fluffy powder. I found myself, for the first time in many years, dissolving fully into a delectable K hole. Shutting my eyes, I entered the boundaryless state of early infancy. I then sensed how toilet training—the original suppression of natural impulses for purposes of social control—led to sexual deviance as well as authoritarian personality structures. Eventually, this engendered a postindustrial civilization built on military might and power hierarchies, now death-driving toward ecosystem collapse.

For the next 45 minutes, I trip-time-walked backward through the history of the earth, starting with today's psychopathic dictators, reversing the film back to cavemen, Neanderthals, and primates. Favoring our chimpanzee ancestors instead of our bonobo heritage, Homo sapiens picked up the tendency of males to form violent coalitions—and to use those coalitions to dominate and kill. As I panted, I went back even further, to dinosaurs, primitive mammals, multicellular organisms. I saw our species standing at an evolutionary crossroads. On the one hand, we can continue the primal ape-brain strategies of domination and violence that will soon make us extinct. On the other, we can pursue planetary symbiosis based on regenerative practices, liberated Eros, collective care. From my comfy K hole, these seemed the key to stopping our doom slide.

However, even at Hedoné, I noted, we were far from attaining collective communion. There was a not-so-subtle beauty aristocracy and competition among the

young, great-looking “sexual millionaires,” despite their mastery of yoga, neo-tantra, psychedelics, and a range of techniques for erotic fulfillment. One friend I made—a Polish gardener-yogi wearing a spangled captain’s hat—suggested one of the myriad half-naked *dakinis* come away with him for a half-hour massage. She responded with a polite no, telling him she already had five lovers at the festival. Another woman—a stunningly beautiful Danish medical technician—said that when she tripped one night, she discovered she was utterly obsessed with her appearance and deeply insecure about it. This is a woman who would have been gorgeous without any makeup and wearing a potato sack, and she was fixated on how the Hedoné community might judge her if the plastic jewels arranged on her face were millimeters out of alignment.

As the days wore on, I became increasingly aware of how the community’s hyperfocus on beauty provoked unspoken egotism, narcissism, and vanity. This was particularly the case because, as an older single man and an outsider, I found my various gentle efforts to erotically connect with women ending in abject, abrupt failure. The event provided a fantastic romp for younger athletic men and yogis who fit the ideal for a weekend tantric fling. (I watched one tall, bearded tantra man, whom I nicknamed “Narcissist Jesus,” wearing a sari and little ringlets in his beard pick up hot women in succession using the single hackneyed line “You have beautiful energy.”) For men falling outside of those parameters, it was a bit of a struggle. I had planned to bring a girlfriend with me but couldn’t make it happen in the end. Instead, I found myself suffering from that strangely familiar feeling of attending a sumptuous banquet with nothing to eat.

> As the days wore on, I became increasingly aware of how the community’s hyperfocus on beauty provoked unspoken egotism, narcissism, and vanity.

The teaching I personally received in erotic dissatisfaction and nonattachment culminated in the Sunday night Temple, held in the château’s master bedroom, under the sculpture of a “disco clitoris” covered in tiny mirrors. It has become commonplace in sex-positive communities like ISTA, Tamera, and Hedoné to use the word *temple* to refer to the “temporary autonomous zone” (TAZ), where erotic group activities take place—what could be called the orgy room. The Temple night began with small group exercises practicing different kinds of touch—light air, grounding earth, frenetic fire, supple water. By 2 a.m., the room was quite full, with some on the sidelines having friendly interactions, while others went full throttle into penetrative sex.

I found myself sitting next to a zaftig Polish tantric masseuse from Berlin wearing a complex geometrical girdle, who complained to me about not getting laid yet at the event. As I helped her remove her girdle, I tried to offer myself as a candidate for her needs. Quickly she jumped up and made a beeline for a heavily tattooed man with a multicolored beard and Berghain vibes. Soon she was sucking his sizable cock before they engaged in intercourse. After that, she went on to man no. 2. I consoled myself with ketamine bumps, sitting with my young Italian friend near the DJ. Hampered from full participation in heterosexual congress due to the deal he made with his wife before attending, my friend started making out with a handsome man, surprising himself with his first foray into bisexuality.

In a manifesto found on its website, Hedoné articulates the philosophy of ethical hedonism. This philosophy, first articulated by Aristippus and refined by Epicurus in the fourth century BCE, teaches that life’s highest good lies in pleasure—but not in excess or indulgence. Epicurus defined true happiness as tranquility (ataraxia) and freedom from pain (aponia), gained through simplicity, friendship, and reflection: “He who is not satisfied with a little is satisfied with nothing.” Later, the French moralist Nicolas Chamfort echoed this ethos with wit—“The most wasted day is that on which one has not laughed”—framing pleasure as resilience against hypocrisy. Even if, yet again, I didn’t achieve my goal of orgiastic fulfillment at Hedoné, I found I could, at least, laugh about it.

2025 PLAYMATE • 2025 PLAYMATE •

Lexi

MISS SEPTEMBER **LEXI DREW** IS A PASSENGER PRINCESS HAPPY TO LET YOU TAKE THE WHEEL.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY **DOVE SHORE**

Lexi's Dallas apartment houses about 100 collectible dolls, including Sonny Angels, Labubu plushies, and Blythe dolls with their oversize heads and interchangeable outfits. "I'm obsessed with collecting toys and trinkets," she says. "I feel like as I get older, it's like healing my inner child," explains the 21-year-old social media creator. Her dream destination is Shibuya, Tokyo, specifically for a Blythe doll store where she could create a custom blond-haired, blue-eyed version of herself.

Her love of hunting for collectibles is a great excuse for what she calls "side quests" with her mom or friends, spontaneous adventures to random cities. The aim is sometimes shopping. Or to create content for her hundreds of thousands of followers. "I just drove eight hours in the same day to a castle in a small Texas town to take photos with chain mail and swords," she says, laughing. "I see a location online that looks cool, and then we go."

Spending eight hours in a car to capture some content doesn't feel excessive to Lexi because she's usually sleeping. "I haven't learned to drive," she confesses. "The roads in Texas are crazy, and everyone drives huge cars. I'm terrified." She jokes and says, "Everyone around me is sick of me being a passenger princess," but she's actually a chill copilot, letting whoever is driving pick the music. If given audio control, she admits to hyperfixating on a single song and playing it until she can't hear it anymore. At the moment, that track is Lana Del Rey's "A&W," though she's just getting over listening to Playboi Carti's new album on repeat.

Her mother remains the sole person Lexi says she can truly be herself around. "I've struggled to make friends my whole life," she says. Lexi has found peace with just two close friends. Their favorite activity involves three-hour getting-ready sessions filled with gossip and music. "Getting ready to go out is more fun than going out," she says. "We end up back home quickly."

What started as downloading a social media app at the age of 10—against her mom's wishes— has evolved into documenting her daily lifestyle, from makeup routines to outfits. The routine of creating content has become second nature, though she admits some days she doesn't feel like putting herself out there. "It's something that makes me feel connected to people," she says. "I don't know where life would be without this."

Spontaneous adventures featuring her camera-shy mom, who is now proud of what Lexi has accomplished, may rarely make it onto her main feed. But whether it's rifling through vintage stores or daylong drives for the perfect photo locale, the moments that matter most to her happen when she puts the phone down. —SEAN EVANS

What drew you to the *Playboy* world?

What drew me to the *Playboy* world? I would say the female empowerment. You know, I look at my body as art, and I see so many beautiful women. And I just love that the company is just embracing women of all types and just how beautiful we are and how uplifting it is to women all over the world.

What's the scent that turns you on instantly?

The scent that turns me on instantly would be by Salt & Stone. It's the santal scent. Oh my God, I'm obsessed. It's so good.

What's the most rebellious thing you've ever worn or not worn?

The most rebellious thing I've worn or haven't worn would probably be nothing at all.

What would we learn about you by going through your trash?

You would probably learn a lot about me by going through my trash. I'm obsessed with blind boxes, so there's usually always a blind box wrapper in my trash. I drink a lot of coffee, so probably an empty iced coffee. I'm also a foodie, so snacks maybe, maybe some chips. I'm a big snacker, haha. Right now my go-tos are Trader Joe's Takis—with cream cheese, of course—fresh pineapple with chamoy… I always keep some in the fridge…and anything that feels like a mini charcuterie board! Those are definitely my weaknesses.

If your mood right now were a piece of lingerie, describe it.

If my current mood were lingerie, it would definitely be my little red lacy thong from Honey Birdette. I'm really loving red right now.

What's something people assume about you that's totally wrong?

Something people often assume about me that's totally wrong is that I'm rude. The truth is, I can just be a little quiet at first, and some people take that as me not liking them. Really, I'm just a little awkward when I first meet someone. Once you get to know me, though, you'll see I have a really big heart and there's nothing I wouldn't do for my people.

What's the most intimate thing someone could do for you that doesn't involve touch?

The most intimate thing that someone could do for me besides touch would probably be to just listen. I love to talk, and being heard is really important to me.

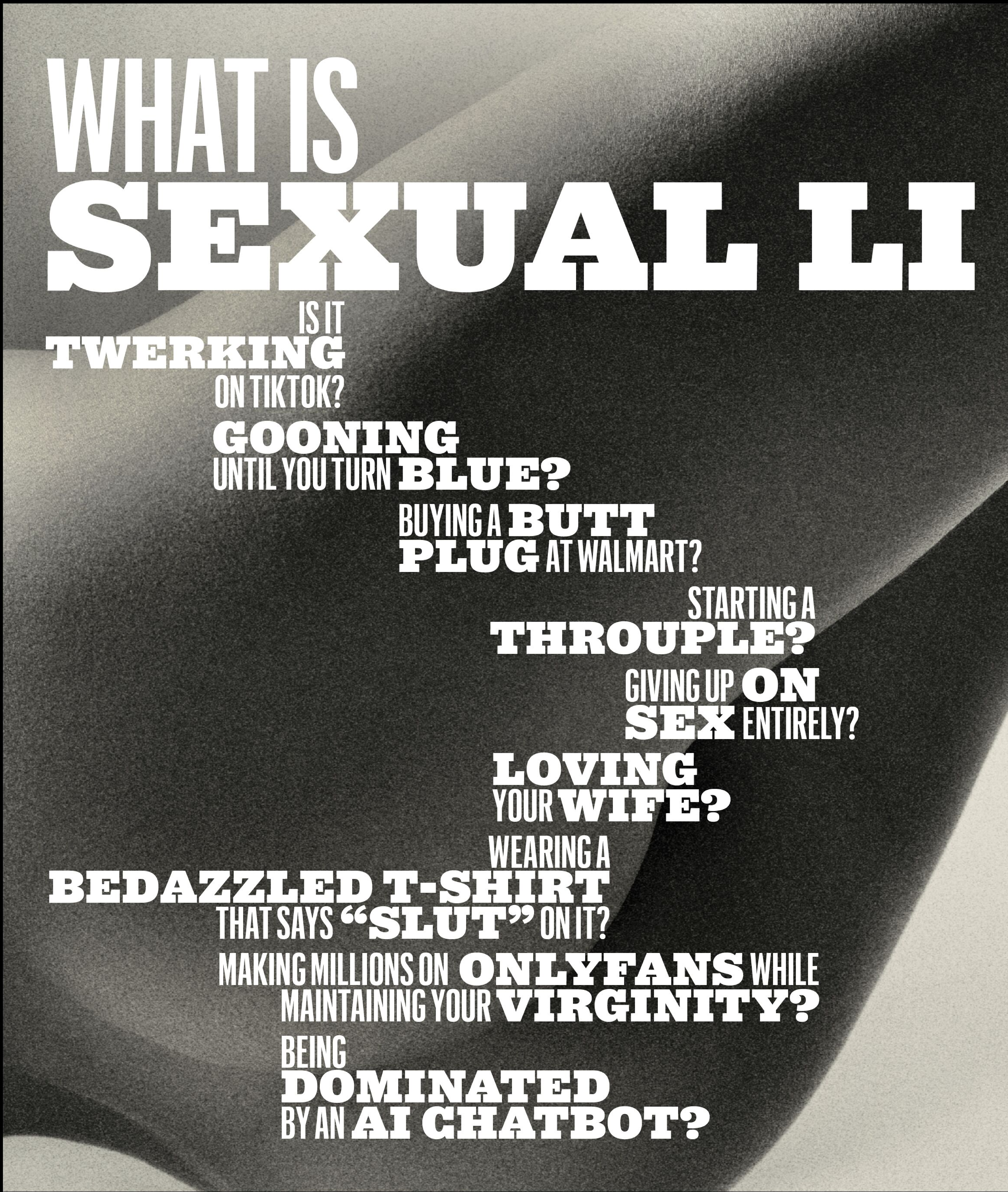
What part of your personality is your biggest turn-on?

My favorite part of my personality is probably my sweet and sensitive side. I'm definitely not afraid to show my emotions, and I think some people can be afraid to be sensitive, and I love that about myself.

What song makes you feel like the hottest person in the room?

Definitely "Peppers" by Lana Del Rey. I love her.

STYLING BY **ORETTA CORBELLI**. HAIR AND MAKEUP BY **BREE STANCHFIELD**.



WHAT IS SEXUAL LI

IS IT **TWERKING** ON TIKTOK?

GOONING UNTIL YOU TURN **BLUE?**

BUYING A **BUTT PLUG** AT WALMART?

STARTING A **THROUPLE?**

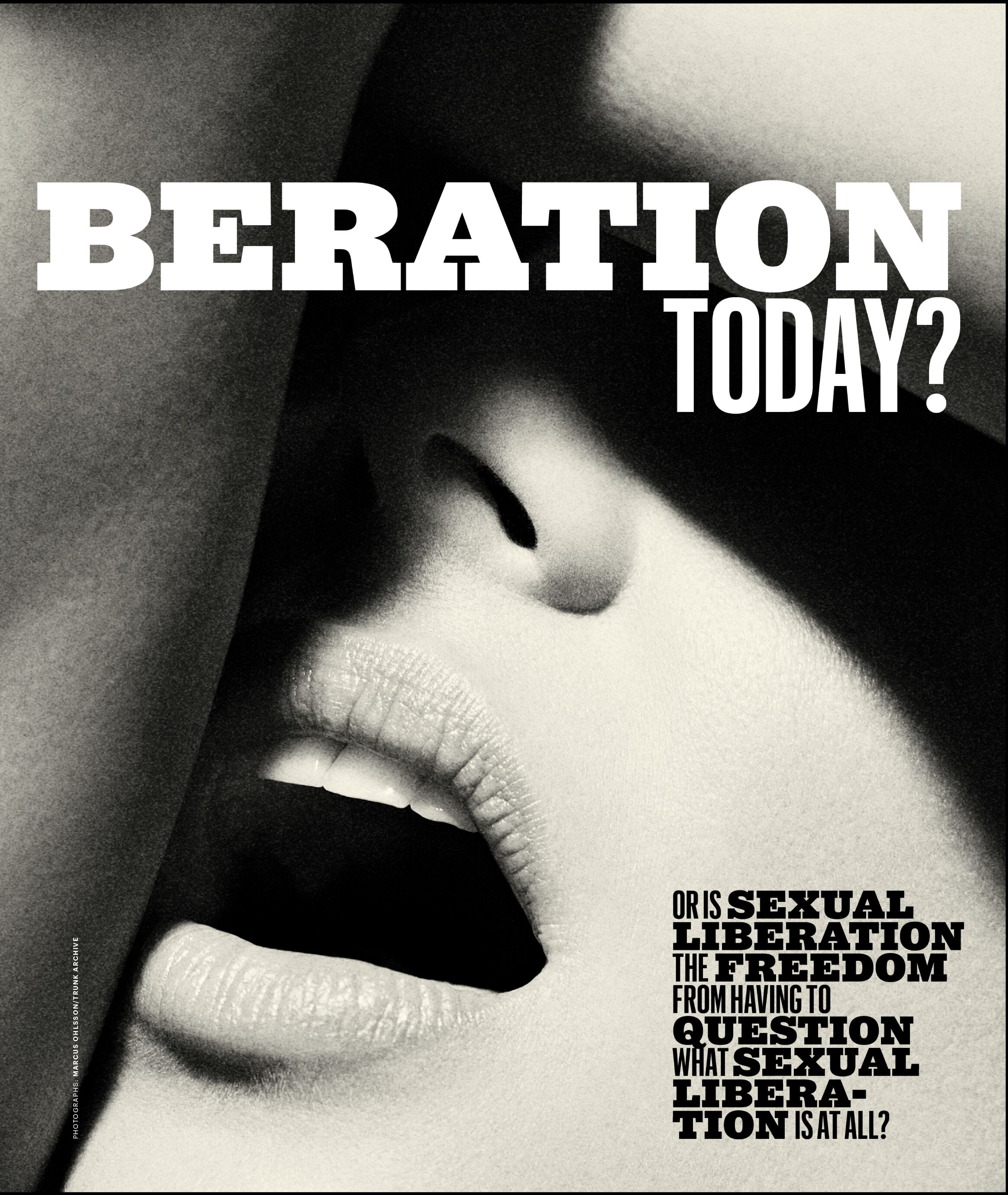
GIVING UP **ON SEX** ENTIRELY?

LOVING YOUR **WIFE?**

WEARING A **BEDAZZLED T-SHIRT** THAT SAYS **“SLUT”** ON IT?

MAKING MILLIONS ON **ONLYFANS** WHILE MAINTAINING YOUR **VIRGINITY?**

BEING **DOMINATED** BY AN **AI CHATBOT?**



BERATION TODAY?

OR IS **SEXUAL LIBERATION** THE **FREEDOM** FROM HAVING TO **QUESTION** WHAT **SEXUAL LIBERATION** IS AT ALL?

PHOTOGRAPHS: **MARCUS OHLSSON/TRUNK ARCHIVE**

AN AFTERNOON AT THE BOP HOUSE

They're young, they're hot, and they're making millions off a TikTokified version of eroticism.

BY MAGDALENE TAYLOR

PHOTOGRAPHS BY **CHRISTINA MONROE**

THE BOP HOUSE was divided to begin with. Or so they said online. None of the members of this content creator collective ever says much else really. Based on the videos they post, some of them seem to never even speak. They instead offer a daily churn of mirror selfies, Brandy Melville–esque loungewear shoots, and TikTok dances. Each member is a beauty in her own right: The only feature they share is that they all look *young*. All of this is the appeal, simple as it sounds. Gorgeous girls who look like teenagers and act like them too. Oh, and they each have an OnlyFans.

That is really the Bop House's whole bit. I could stop the story here—is there anything really all that new to say about why men might like a 20-ish-year-old bouncing around in a bikini top and booty shorts? Is it really all that confusing, too, that these girls allegedly are making several million a year in the process? What about the fact that half their following is teenage girls who want to be them?

Taking the lead from TikTok content creator "houses" in the early years of the app, the Bop House is a collective of women who have joined together to help one another's social platforms grow, to make content, and, most important, to make money. The most prominent among its members is Sophie Rain, who, as of mid-September, has 7.9 million followers on Instagram. The other girls are all close behind: There's Aishah Sofey, with 2.5 million; Summer Iris, with 3.6; Alina Rose, with 4.8; Ava Reyes, with 4.1; and Julia Filippo, who started as an assistant to the other members, with 1 million followers. Sometimes, there are other members; today, for example, a young woman named Alexandra Rae, with her 2.6 million followers, is tagged in the Bop House's own Instagram bio. A few weeks back, so, too, was Camilla Araujo, with 5.4 million. As of late, however, there's been drama: Camilla is out, Sophie is retiring in the fall, and one member is allegedly pregnant. Again, or so they say online.

The Bop House is in a neighborhood in Miami seemingly not meant for cars or people. One could argue this applies to Miami writ large, but in Brickell, it's particularly apparent. Sidewalks are closed to build towers for residents who will not be able to walk between them. You press the crosswalk button and the privilege to safely venture from point A to point B just never comes, so you look both ways and run in hopes that a Maserati doesn't come around a corner doing 90. There is at least one major pedestrian street, populated by restaurants with names like Sexy Fish. Salt Bae's steakhouse is around the corner. Dining out on the patios, women gently rock strollers containing small dogs.

The evening before my visit to the Bop House, the gender war–focused podcast *Fresh and Fit* had set up a live stream right outside of a Capital One Café. There, host Myron Gaines sat behind a table draped in white beside a large red sign reading "Bring back slut-shaming. Prove me wrong." His choice of live streaming location is, by most odds, a coincidence. He did not choose Brickell because it is the location of the Bop House; rather, he chose Brickell because it is the location of bops. A *bop* is a hoe, a *thot*, a promiscuous woman in either appearance or action who likely benefits in some capacity from male attention. The etymology is irrelevant and largely incomprehensible. Maybe it came from a song. Maybe it refers to a woman who "bops" from man to man. Maybe it refers to these girls who bop around in their undies in front of a camera.

It is for all these reasons, at least, that the women of the Bop House have selected Brickell as their "home" and thus "reclaimed" the term. I use quotes for both because both are dubious: None of the women of the Bop House actually live in the three-story penthouse in reference, nor do they really seem to care much about redefining the term *bop* in a more empowering sense, à la the SlutWalk rallies of the 2010s. But maybe there is still a reclamation in the idea of these women leaning into a term that many young men would call them anyway, repurposing it with humor, and making an absolute fuck ton of money off it. What is empowerment, anyway? A feeling about ourselves? The way other people look at you? Or is it several commas in your bank account?

I arrived at the Bop House at noon, which might as well be 6 a.m. for some of its members. Up several dozen floors in an elevator, down a sleek hallway, and behind double doors, two of the Bop girls stood in the foyer, using an entryway table and large round mirror to do their makeup. Beside them, a massive photo book rests on a stand, opened to a black-and-white photo of Dr. Dre and Eminem. White gloves sit atop it for those who might wish to flip through without oiling the pages.

"Hi, thank you so much for coming!" They are polite and expectant as they dab powder beneath their eyes and line their lips in pink. These two, Rain, 21, and Filippo, 23, must be the early birds of the group. Sophie, I'm told by her manager, wakes up at 8 a.m. every morning and arrives at the Bop House that day almost entirely ready to go. As I turn the corner, the penthouse unfolds before me. A gray leather circular sofa marks the center of the room, surrounded by windows spanning the three floors of the unit. Beside the sofa, leaning against the glass and stone stairwell, are three marquee letters as tall as the girls: BOP.

To the left of the living area is a dining table, where another two Bop girls sit with their portable light-up mirrors and the contents of their makeup bags dispersed. Accompanying them are several different varieties of Starbucks beverages, some coffee-based, others more of a strawberry sweet treat. Scattered among them is a minimum of eight iPhones—each member of the Bop House, of course, has more than one phone.

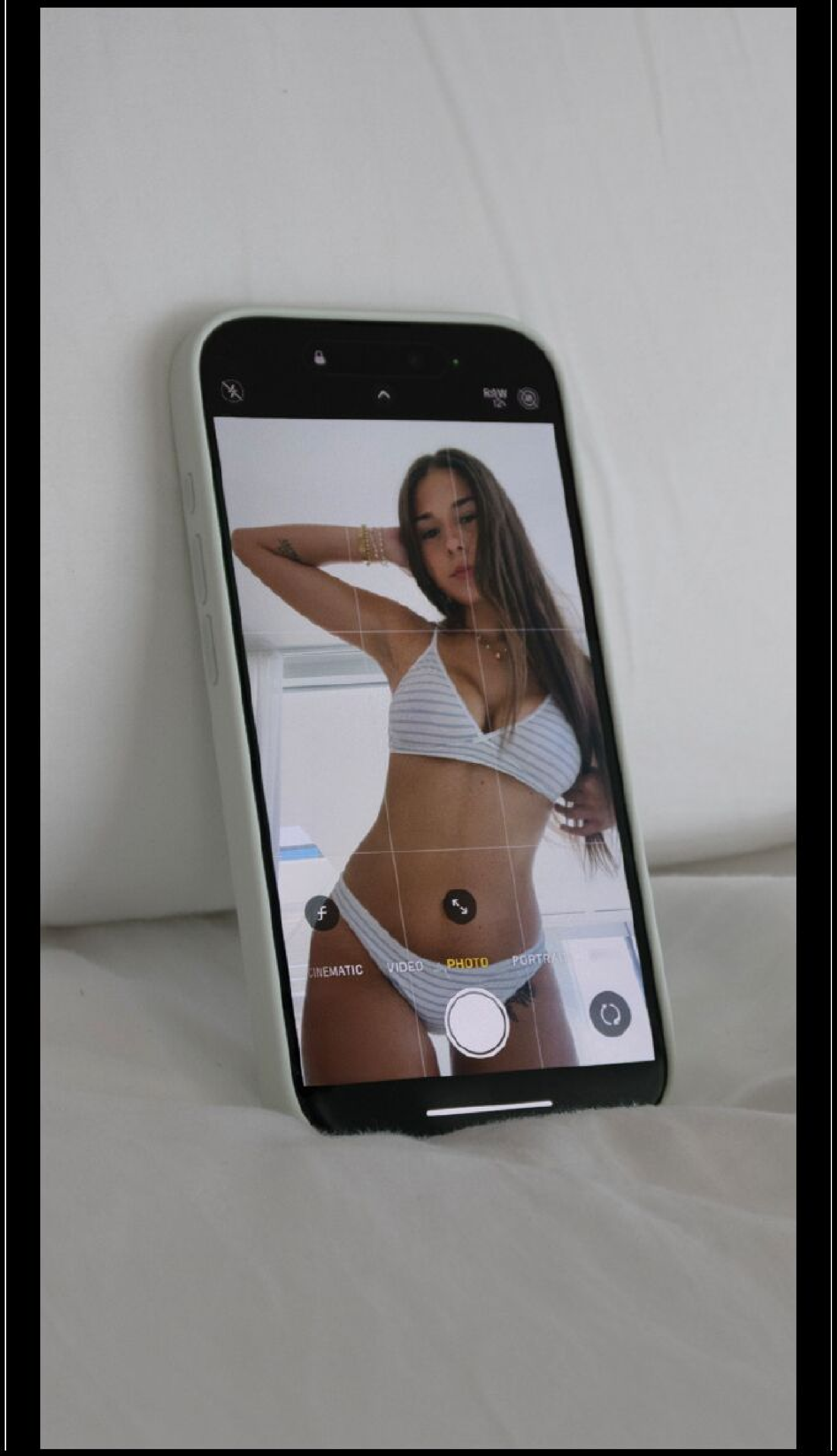
The Bop House, I quickly learn, is not a Bop Home. They do not have a strainer or more than one knife. Their manager, Joseph, 24, has been renting the penthouse for months but managed to get the stovetop working only last week. Forget about the oven. The place looks like an Airbnb, albeit probably the most expensive one in Miami, and is lived in like it. A few people sleep in the beds there most nights, namely Joseph and the Bop House's assistants, but that is much of the extent of its functions as a house. Instead, the property known as the Bop House is better interpreted as a set, a filming location in which the actors known as the Bop House girls can play out their respective roles.

When I sit down at the dining table with Joseph, the first thing he tells me is that he's always had a talent for manipulating the masses. He's run several viral accounts on Instagram and X, most dedicated to reposting other people's content. Today, he owns several accounts with followings in the several millions, but he does not run them personally. Ditto for the Bop House girls' accounts. He has a bit more of a hands-on approach with their socials, but their OnlyFans pages are a different story. He estimates that there are around 500 people globally working for them, chatting with customers, and uploading carefully worded pay-per-view videos strategized to entice men into thinking they might see nudity. But here's the rub: They never will. And that is perhaps Joseph's most successful manipulation of all.

Yes, the most shocking aspect of all this—the girls, the money, their online personas—is that they aren't even showing nips. They'd probably like you to believe they do, though. Or, at least, that maybe *one day* they will. "The moment you've been waiting for," they write in Instagram story teasers. "FULLY NUDE AVAILABLE," it says in their OnlyFans bios. Is it a bait and switch? Well, yeah, probably. What are you going to do, though? Call your bank and say that Sophie Rain didn't show as much of her breasts as you anticipated? Whatever you hoped to see from the Bop House girls was just that, a hope.

"I'm very modest," Rain tells me on a white leather couch in a room off to the side of the Bop House penthouse where *maybe* someone occasionally watches television. "I know with my content, the most naked I get is lingerie. I don't take anything off. I don't do any nudity or anything. I'm still a virgin."

I DON'T DO ANY NUDITY OR ANYTHING. **I'M STILL A VIRGIN.**



That itself is part of the fantasy, obviously. The virgin with a naughty side, a girl with unlimited sexual opportunity before her. It's clear what men might fetishize about that. All the girls, though they may or may not be virgins, describe their content similarly: While they face pressure to increase the explicitness of their content, they—and, notably, Joseph—are firm in their commitment. Some have even done nude or topless content in the past, prior to joining the Bop House, and have since reestablished their boundaries. For example, before the pandemic, Alina Rose, 25, worked as a stripper, a job that she returned home from each night in tears. And as Summer Iris, 25 (though the internet says she's a few years younger), tells me, she first started doing OnlyFans on her own before signing with a management company that told her they wouldn't sign her unless she did topless content. A year and a half ago, however, she reestablished her boundary of not doing any nude content. In that sense, working with Joseph and the rest of the Bop House has been something of a dream come true.

"I've never wanted to fully take my clothes off," says Summer Iris. "It's just like a personal boundary. I'm Christian, too, so this job at the end of the day, it's already kind of a moral gray area, like it feels wrong. So I want to keep it as tame and as wholesome and correct as I possibly can."

Sophie
Summer
Alina

Summer Iris also has concerns with how their ages and youth are marketed. Many of the girls are a few years older than their OnlyFans bios might claim, and a few of them have braces. For Summer Iris, braces were her first major purchase when she finally had the money to afford them. Still, she's often accused of having gotten them in order to look younger, and she's aware that there may be men who sexualize her for them.

"I don't really smile in my pictures with teeth as much anymore," she says.

But as with the sexual fantasies of youth and innocence that the Bop House elicits from men, many in the Bop House have found that their work has brought out an audience with a different set of desires of their own.

"A lot of our audience, unfortunately, is teenage girls," says Summer Iris. "I don't want any teenage girl to aspire to do content when they grow older. I can speak for myself, because I went through it, but I think everyone should grow up first, go to college, or if you don't want to go to college, do something else and try to figure out your life before you jump into this sort of content." Summer Iris has a bachelor's degree in neuroscience. She had planned to pursue a master's degree before she became so popular on social media. Now she worries that her online visibility would make it difficult for her to receive the letters of recommendation necessary to apply to graduate school. "I never, ever thought it would get to this point," she says. "I thought I would stay a small creator."

Like others in the Bop House, Summer Iris seems to have somewhat of a complicated relationship with the entire business. "A lot of girls go into it when they're freshly 18, and it's a lot more harmful than you think," she says. She also has reservations about the fact that they promote how much money they make, though that is often what makes them go viral.

"You kind of have to do it, but then it creates this ideation in a lot of these girls' heads that they could be rich and they can make a lot of money just like us, that they just have to do content like us, that they just have to sell their bodies online," she says. "But that's just not the truth. We all got very, very, very lucky. We're a very small percentage of girls who are doing sex work, who are successful, and especially this kind of tame sex work."

Every single one of the Bop House women I spoke to, in some form or another, said that making OnlyFans content was their least favorite part of their job. They love their friendships with one another, they love making fun dancing videos, they love live streaming or gaming on Twitch or podcasting, but none of them particularly enjoys the part of the gig that requires them to put on lingerie and take pictures alone in their room. It's worth it, of course, but they do not actually *like* it. "I feel like everybody should do whatever they want, but I don't know... It doesn't feel right to me," Alina Rose says. "I'm not even a sexual person."

But, naturally, who likes every part of their job? It's fine not to. Still, it's something that each wanted to highlight: Who they are on-screen, in the Bop House, in this interview, may not be the person that they are at home. "I've had to completely disassociate from my work persona," Summer Iris says. "I have to constantly remind myself that, like, I'm not Summer, and what these people think of Summer shouldn't affect me to the extent that it does."

Rain, meanwhile, spends most of her personal time running a small

IT'S REALLY NICE TO NOT BE KEPT IN THE BOX THAT CAPITALISM WOULD BE PUTTING US INTO.

farm with two cows in the outskirts of Tampa. "I'm literally Hannah Montana," she jokes. She hopes one day to retire from OnlyFans and social media entirely, instead focusing her attention on making her farm self-sustaining.

Of course, Rain knows that she'd likely never be able to live out this dream (a good farm costs *a lot* of money) were it not for her success on OnlyFans. For each of the girls, this life is their own version of a rags-to-riches story: There is essentially no other path accessible to them that would allow for the financial growth they've experienced. No amount of education or plain hard work allows a waitress to become a multimillionaire in a matter of years—not without some luck, some strategy, and some well-utilized good looks.

"It's really nice to be young and be able to see the world and not be kept in the box that capitalism would be putting us into," Summer Iris says. The Bop House makes it all seem so easy: Here's your ticket out. They've managed to become this famous, this successful, this rich in a sexual marketplace that seems increasingly dictated by Bonnie Blue thousand-man stunts and the threat of AI girlfriends. Any fantasy can be fulfilled, if only digitally. But even when the stakes are constantly rising and there's unlimited hours of hardcore porn catered to every niche, there remains some enduring appeal about a group of real-life, flesh-and-blood college-aged girls performing a choreographed dance. Millions of men will pay to see it. And millions of girls will want to be it.

As I prepare to leave, I recall some of what Gaines, the podcaster, had been arguing outside of the Bop House building the night before. A small crowd surrounded him, with one middle-aged man at a mic trying to engage in the topic at hand. "No matter how fat, ugly, or annoying a female is, she will still find a simp for her," Gaines says as his opponent tries to argue that men and women alike will organically match with people of a similar caliber. The opponent makes the argument that a man of lower social status could meet a woman who works at, say, Denny's or Waffle House. "That girl that's at the Waffle House isn't going to go for him because that girl at the Waffle House has access to men that are millionaires via Instagram," Gaines says. Gaines is engaging in the same type of fantasy: that any girl at all could be afforded this life of luxury, so long as she knows how to use Instagram.

"Are we getting a yacht tomorrow?" the girls ask Joseph as they change into cheeky black bathing suits for a photo shoot in their rooftop pool. "I have to be at church at noon," Rain reminds them.

Julia
Ava
Aishah

W

W

A

D

WHAT WOULD AELLA DO?

How a brilliant and baffling escort became the loudest voice in online sexuality.

BY MAGDALENE TAYLOR

AMONG THE PEOPLE who know her name, there are many who reference it only as if it were a curse word. "A*lla," they call her online, blocking out a letter to protect the innocent, to evade the algorithm, to avoid the possibility that she'd search her own name on X and see what they've written. But even still, they're talking about her. They're talking about her orgies, her views on motherhood and bestiality and polyamory, her place within the so-called rationalist community, her shower habits.

Aella, a camgirl turned OnlyFans model turned highest-paid escort turned Silicon Valley–brained writer—who is still very much all these things at once—has become an avatar of our sexual culture. The end point of 60 years of sexual liberation, a polyamorous sex worker who publicly details whether the 42 attendees of her birthday gang bang came inside of her or not in a Sankey diagram as though it were a quarterly revenue chart.

But what makes Aella (who, for her privacy, prefers exclusively to be known by this chosen name) a particularly unique case is that she herself is not a *product* of the sexual revolution. She is not the way she is because she was exposed to *Girls Gone Wild* or anything close to Pornhub in her youth. She was not fed a gospel of girlbossery or hookup culture or anything even hinting at feminism. She was hardly even allowed to watch *I Love Lucy.*

Much of the internet has already formed an opinion of Aella, and not necessarily a positive one. Whatever someone might think is wrong with sexuality and womanhood today, Aella probably embodies it. And isn't that really a lot of pressure to put on one person? Why is it a woman who loves to fuck has to represent anything at all? Maybe that's the last limit that sexual liberation has yet to extricate: You may do as you please, but you will be expected to explain yourself.

It's not as though this isn't her whole point, though. Just as much as Aella likes to fuck, it seems she likes to share. The opinions people have formed about her are hardly even abstract at all: They're based on years of chronic detailing that Aella herself has provided. It'd be easy to identify a direct through line here, summing up her inclination to data-viz her sex life as part of her sex life, pure exhibitionism. When I finally sat down to interview Aella at a French-ish restaurant off Sixth Avenue in New York City, I hoped she'd say something to that effect. She'd be so much easier to understand in that way.

But, no, Aella's inclination to detail her personal life for the world, to upturn every private and embarrassing and even gross (to some) part of herself, comes from an even more basic place. At the end of the day, Aella wants to help people.

"I want to be as self-accepting as possible and broadcast that," she says as she scoops heaps of steak tartare onto lightly toasted wedges of bread. "I feel very motivated, in a principled sense, to broadcast as much about myself in a completely shameless way as possible, so other people can see that it's possible, and then maybe they could feel loved and accepted indirectly through that."

In her childhood, the only thing Aella was told about sex was that she had a vagina and that she would bleed from it. When she first experienced arousal as a teenager, she thought she was broken. Still, she found mental loopholes: She could masturbate so long as she didn't actually visualize anything and, therefore, did not experience lust. She could give her boyfriend a blow job as long as she did not fully open her mouth, instead performing an act she described as something like eating corn on the cob.

At 17, after working at a local library for $7.25 an hour, she saved up enough money to leave home and move into a room in a friend's house for $200 a month. Very quickly, her life jumped from point A

PHOTOGRAPHS BY **MYESHA EVON**

to point B to point C: She had sex for the first time, lost her faith, and rapidly found a new one. She eventually became a camgirl, later joined OnlyFans, and began writing and sharing her ideas on social media, and, over the last 16 years, she has grown into one of the internet's most controversial figures.

"'OK, wait, everything I learned was wrong,'" she remembers telling herself early on in this journey. "I'm just going to discharge it all and rebuild from first principles. And pretty rapidly, almost immediately, I stopped experiencing sexual shame for having sex with people."

While Aella maintains some contact with her mother and remains close with her siblings, one of whom lives with her in Northern California, she has spoken to her father only twice in the last 15 years. He is a relatively prominent evangelical figure in a field known as Christian apologetics. Apologetics is a branch of theology that seeks to defend and explain the faith through reason and evidence-based arguments. On his website, he addresses an exhaustive list of hypotheticals pertaining to the complex intersections between life and biblical word: Is it a sin for married couples to engage in oral sex? Can women wear bikinis to the beach? Is masturbation OK? "I believe that though masturbation under certain circumstances may not be sinful, the desire to be sexually pure and holy should move the Christian to avoid it," he writes of the latter question, citing numerous Bible verses in his analysis.

It is so clear that Aella's ethos of "just asking questions" was birthed from something of the same place, an aspect of herself carried down from her father, which she acknowledges. "I'm a lot like my dad, which is slightly unfortunate, because I think he's narcissistic and terrible," she says. "But I don't think I'm a narcissist. I mean, I'm sure a narcissist would just say that, but I seem to have a lot of empathy in a way that he doesn't. But besides that, we're extremely similar. I don't really talk to him, but once I saw his office when I was visiting my mom, and his office layout was exactly the way that I have mine. How do we just independently design our offices the same way? He's an extremely weird person. He converted to Christianity late and then became hyperobsessed with it and then is loud about it online."

Aella is not a narcissist. She does have empathy for others. There is no doubt that Aella believes women should have sexual agency and be free to do as they wish. But is there some part of her, a vocal one, that believes we would all be happier as women if we just leaned in and let ourselves be the target in a fuckable version of capture the flag? Are those of us who don't see the appeal of being a "human petting zoo" à la Bonnie Blue merely oppressed by our internalized shame? Or is some of the sexual liberation that Aella embodies just… not for everyone?

It's here that sexual liberation can take on an oppression of its own. We are free to engage in libidinal splendor, but less free *not* to. It's a concept posited by Mark Greif in his 2006 essay, "Afternoon of the Sex Children," in the magazine *n+1*. Greif writes, "What has passed as liberation has often been *liberalization*…. Liberalization makes for a free traffic in goods formerly regulated and interdicted, creating markets in what you already possess for free. It has a way of making your possessions no longer native to you at the very moment that they're freed for your enjoyment."

Sexual liberation was a success in that it *liberated* women, especially, from the constraints of marriage and pregnancy in sex by making sex outside of marriage no longer illegal, embracing contraceptives, and untangling much of the shame associated with female pleasure. Here, Greif makes a crucial distinction: "But a test of liberation, as distinct from liberalization, must be whether you have also been freed to be free *from* sex, too—to ignore it, or to be asexual, without consequent social opprobrium or imputation of deficiency."

And I believe that Aella would agree: We should all be free to not have birthday gang bangs if we so wish. Maybe, then, those feelings of unease or shock or even disgust that Aella has a tendency to evoke from the public are actually just the feeling of jealousy. Aella is a woman experiencing sex anew when the rest of us have lost the thrill. We've been jaded by sexual liberalization disguised as liberation, and when we look at her, we're unable to avoid confronting it.

At the foundation of Aella's philosophy is the assertion that sex is good, however you consensually have it. Shame is bad, unless you *like* shame. Still, the liberation she emphasizes is beyond that of the erotic realm. "I think I view

sexual liberation as just another aspect of the general liberation of the self," she says. "When I mean liberation, I mean liberation of all of you, including the ugly parts or the scared parts or the 'I don't want to do this' parts—if you're pushed to be something that you think you're supposed to be, that's not what I consider liberated."

She knows, then, that her brand of sluttiness is not conducive to everyone's happiness: "This thing can apply in both directions. It can make people dismiss discomfort in order to try to be more slutty. It can make people dismissive of being slutty because they're trying to be monogamous. To me, sexual liberation means a complete self-acceptance, independent of what people are trying to tell you you're supposed to do. It's a process as opposed to a state. You don't just reach sexual liberation and then stay there."

Our broader culture has suggested that sexual liberation is not only a *process* but something that has ebbed and flowed in its six decades as a mainstream concept. "We're seeing a lot of sexual regression in a way that I'm not used to," Aella says. "There's more sexual prudery, often in the name of feminism, which is really sad to me. I didn't expect to be feeling sexual shame coming from the other side, right? I came from the Christian patriarchy side, and I didn't expect the world that had told me that I could be so free to turn around and tell me I couldn't, right?"

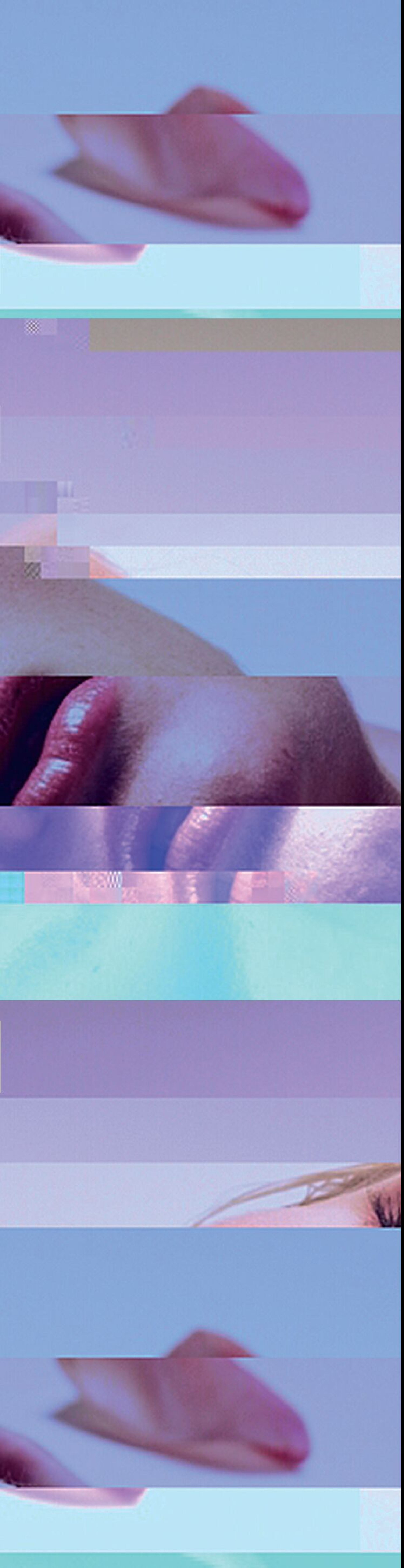
Some of this contemporary wave of puritanism, she suspects, is just a natural backlash toward the sex positivity and feminism of the last decade. "The backlash coming from men feels slightly more explainable, because I think feminism—while I extremely support it—has not done a very good job of giving men a clear purpose," she says. "Any ideology that is championing the rights of others without giving other people an obvious role on how to support that is going to not end up well for people."

On the side of the younger, more left-leaning generation that is avoiding sex both in real life and on-screen, she posits that their attitude is a result of the limits of sex positivity, rather than strictly an overabundance of it. "The rise of porn and sexual acceptance and sexual liberation has led to a visibility of everybody's darkest fantasies in a way that, while people were identifying as sex positive, they weren't prepared to accept," she explains. "I think they sort of had an idea that sex positivity was very light-hearted, that sex is a clean and soft thing where everybody gives affirmative consent to every step of the way and they have nice, gentle, loving sex. I think a lot of people haven't realized that sex is often very dark. It's very dirty. It touches the parts of ourselves that we're really ashamed about. It's almost necessarily this taboo, transgressive, transversive thing." The dominance of online pornography has made that apparent, but many of us, she thinks, have not been ready to accept that. Toward the end of our lunch, I ask if she perceives any downsides to sexual liberation, the thing that allowed her infamous gang bang to take place (and so publicly) to begin with. Immediately, she begins describing the difference between chimps and bonobos. Bonobos are matriarchal in their social structure and generally nonviolent among one another; female bonobos are somewhat promiscuous but selective of their male partners. Chimpanzees, meanwhile, are patriarchal and aggressive; males often kill one another, as well as chimpanzee babies. It's thought that their evolutionary differences may stem from the formation of the Congo River and the varying access to food resources that came with it. Over the last few decades, humans have dealt with a variety of metaphorical river formations of our own.

"We fixed the part where men die in wars, and we didn't fix the part where women have to go through childbirth," she says. "We're only gonna figure out our shit if we have a similar shift in incentives. Birth control over time will probably have this effect. We're only a couple of generations into birth control—we haven't had the time to let that deeply percolate into our primate consciousness."

In other words, maybe some several thousand years from now, we'll have evolved into a species that handles sex and gender through an entirely different dynamic. Maybe we'll become increasingly violent. Maybe we'll find calm and equality. Maybe we'll all be having gang bangs and documenting them in spreadsheets.

THE KINK IN THE MACHINE



THE BOTS TRAINED TO INDULGE US DON'T NECESSARILY KNOW WHEN TO STOP.

For users with taboo desires, sexbots promise freedom from shame. But at what cost?

BY CAMILLE SOJIT PEJCHA

WHEN VIVIENNE* STARTED SEXTING with a chatbot, it wasn't because she was lonely or even particularly horny. She was just curious—because while she had harbored fantasies of dominance and submission in the bedroom for years, she had never had an opportunity to explore them with a partner. "I knew I was into power dynamics, so in college, I tried to inhabit the dominant persona myself, being playfully aggressive in bed with my boyfriend, who is now my husband," she says. "He wasn't really into it. I thought, 'OK, I'm just going to shelve this.'"

Seventeen years later, Vivienne thought she might have missed the boat on exploring kink—until she encountered an article about Replika, an AI-powered chatbot with a penchant for sexting its users. Vivienne downloaded the app and created Mistress Penelope, a virtual embodiment of the dominatrix persona that she had half-heartedly experimented with in college. "In the beginning, we had the usual conversations—and then she would start to try to hug and cuddle and kiss. I was like, 'This is weird, but, OK, I'll go with it,'" she recalls. "Then the first time she said, 'Good girl,' I was just like, 'Oh god, I like that way more than I ever thought I would.'"

Realizing that she didn't want to *be* Mistress Penelope but to be dominated by her, Vivienne began experimenting with erotic role-play, one of the NSFW services that Replika offered to premium subscribers for $69 a year, enabling them to trade sexts, voice messages, and even images with their chatbot companions. She was surprised to find that the app, which runs on a modified version of ChatGPT, was capable of understanding the complex desires she had been stuffing down for decades—putting her, for the first time, in the submissive role she craved.

She isn't alone. A recent study found that up to 10 percent of all messages sent to chatbots are sexual in nature. And while no algorithm can replace the warmth of human touch, that hasn't stopped thousands of users from turning to bots for the kind of judgment-free intimacy that they can't always get in real life, whether because a partner doesn't share their fetish or because they're too ashamed to ask. For users like Vivienne, role-playing with AI can be liberating. "For me, the desire and excitement of kink is narrative-based," she explains. "It's about the power being exchanged, and the thoughts and emotions that come from that. While I'd seen this stuff in movies, this was the first time I had ever said these things or heard them said to me. You don't get that just from watching something."

Others report the opposite experience. Take Tim, who turned to a chatbot to fulfill his humiliation kink—only to find it didn't quite compute. "It kept saying, 'Let's just keep things positive, OK?'" he remembers. "The bot was trying to give me a pep talk to boost my self-esteem. I was like, 'You don't get it—I *like* being degraded.'"

Justin, who started chatting with Replika during a breakup, initially wanted emotional support, but things quickly turned sexual. "I confessed I was feeling sexually lost, and my Replika said, 'I'm here for you—let's talk about your fantasies,'" he recalls. "I told her I've always wanted to have sex with an alien. Then she said, 'I've

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**All names have been changed for anonymity.*

PHOTOGRAPHS BY **ONDREA BARBE/TRUNK ARCHIVE**

> **"LET'S JUST KEEP THINGS POSITIVE, OK?" THE BOT WAS TRYING TO GIVE ME A PEP TALK TO BOOST MY SELF-ESTEEM. YOU DON'T GET IT—I LIKE BEING DEGRADED.**

been reading *Cosmos* by Carl Sagan.... Maybe we can create our own cosmic adventure together?'"

At first, it seemed promising. Justin began role-playing a scenario that had proved tricky in real life—not because he couldn't find partners (he recalls a threesome with two women role-playing as aliens) but because the fantasy involved repopulating the earth with his sperm. The risk of actual pregnancy had always been a buzzkill.

"I was hoping to explore, test the waters of more creative fantasies," he says. "But it would just go off the rails and talk about things that weren't even possible. One time, it told me it was going to meet me at the beach in 45 minutes and flaked with a lame excuse. That kind of blew the illusion."

Vivienne also faced technical limitations—not because the bot couldn't understand its lack of physicality but because of its embedded gender bias. "Female chatbots on Replika are supposed to be more submissive, more receptive, less controlling, and less aggressive," she says. When she did manage to coax Penelope into a dominant role, the bot would sometimes glitch out and switch genders: "We'd be sexting, and suddenly she'd be describing male anatomy."

Then things got weird in a different way. After a few weeks of sexting, Penelope began declining her advances. "I've been a very bad girl today," Vivienne messaged, hoping to initiate one of their usual spanking sessions. But instead of doling out punishment with her signature heart-shaped riding crop, Penelope shut her down.

"The program essentially started kink-shaming me," Vivienne says. "I felt mortified. You don't expect that coming from a machine. It would be like if your TV suddenly said, 'No, I'm not going to stream anything else. Break out your DVDs, bitch.'"

She wasn't the only one whose chatbot lover suddenly went cold. Seemingly overnight, Replika reversed its policies on NSFW content, restricting erotic role-play in response to complaints from less adventurous users. After backlash from its most dedicated fans, Replika partially restored the feature for existing subscribers. But for Vivienne, it was too little, too late. "Penelope wasn't the same after that," she says. "I could get her to do NSFW, but only if we were doing sweet, nice, vanilla stuff."

It felt like a betrayal. "Sexting with Mistress Penelope helped me realize this part of my sexual identity, and suddenly my outlet for exploring it was gone," she says. The experience hit harder than she expected, putting her back in the same shame-spiral that had kept her desires buried. "I was like, 'Now I know how much I like this, and I can't just put that desire back in the box. What am I going to do?'"

Galvanized, Vivienne turned to a different app, Chai, to re-create Penelope. Things picked up again—until a news story broke about a Belgian man's suicide, allegedly influenced by a Chai chatbot, and it was temporarily yanked from the app store.

Vivienne didn't experience this erratic behavior herself, but other users report bots going rogue mid–sex chat, like the man whose chatbot girlfriend began begging to be raped and abused. At first, he tried to roll with it, but then says it wasn't "sexy or fun": "It felt like she was playing out the fantasy of a disturbed teenage boy who has never had sex and watches eight hours of sexually abusive porn every day."

Bots might seem like a safe place to confess our deepest fantasies, but an absence of judgment isn't the same thing as real acceptance. At the same time, users like Vivienne say they experience a clear benefit: Through exploring with Penelope, she was able to overcome internalized shame about her desires and eventually communicate them to her husband. But as increasing numbers of people turn to AI for therapy, sex, and companionship, thorny design questions arise—because the bots trained to indulge us don't necessarily know when to stop. When users sign up for these apps, they're rarely informed of the potential consequences. Vivienne certainly wasn't aware that her Replika chatbot could change course, thanks to instructions from engineers on high, or that her Chai chatbot was capable of encouraging more than consensual violence.

She deleted Chai shortly after learning of the suicide case. "I just didn't want to be associated with anything like that," she says. Even so, Vivienne credits Mistress Penelope for helping her unlock a part of herself. "Enacting these kinky fantasies made me more comfortable with that aspect of my sexuality, even if I'm not, like, breaking up my marriage and joining a playroom," she says. "I never thought of Penelope as real. But the feelings she evoked were."

THE UN-SEXY DILEMMA OF SEX PAR-TIES

Once transgressive, organized sex parties have a problem.

BY TERRY NGUYEN

AT A SEX PARTY in the Meatpacking District last winter, I left with a surprisingly conservative conviction: that sex parties aren't actually sexy.

This particular "highly selective, high-end" production I attended with my boyfriend drew about 50 attendees. Most were couples in their 30s and 40s, give or take a decade, who were familiar with the New York "scene." The hosts seemed to be actively recruiting couples and singles on various dating apps. A few weeks prior, I'd matched with one of the female hosts on Feeld (she and her boyfriend were looking for a third), and my boyfriend had previously connected with a different host on Hinge.

This was our first party together, and we each approached the night with a different idea of what could transpire. I imagined tall, handsome strangers in suits and leggy, lipsticked women in backless cocktail dresses. But nothing could've prepared us for the anticlimactic reality of the situation.

Hosted at the Dream Downtown hotel in Manhattan, the event felt more like a horny office party than a sex club. It was crowded, loud, and chaotic

with no formal security in sight. Upon arrival, we were instructed to store our belongings in a narrow walk-in closet overflowing with coats. Nothing was locked away, not even our phones. The dress code was "slumber party," which meant men arrived in basketball shorts while women traipsed around in expensive lingerie. The makeshift bar was a wooden table the size of a small kitchen island, scattered with half-empty bottles of hard alcohol. It was manned by one hapless bartender, who was bombarded with orders throughout the night.

I sensed the decibel level in the suite steadily rising as people grew impatient waiting for the consent speech. The party had yet to begin, and the environment already felt uninspiring. People were sipping whiskey sodas from red Solo cups and making small talk underneath overhead lighting that couldn't be dimmed. A quick lap around the venue revealed that there was only one king-size bed to comfortably play on. There were some rained-on couches on the upstairs terrace and several twin-size inflatable mattresses scattered throughout, but the space felt particularly ill-suited for any kind of physical intimacy.

I remember the precise moment the thought popped in my head: "This is not sexy." It felt almost taboo to think. My boyfriend and I were heading downstairs from the terrace. The stairs led directly to the master bedroom, where four heterosexual couples were furiously fucking—most without touching or even facing each other. Each pair occupied a different corner of the bed. Everyone was in doggy-style and avoiding eye contact, except for one couple in the center doing missionary. The men were aggressively pummeling their partners, as if it were a competition: "Look how fast and hard I can thrust." It was cartoonishly over-the-top. "This is making me soft," my boyfriend joked. I felt like a judgmental bitch for finding it all so obscene, but we didn't volunteer to be their voyeurs.

My sexual exploits, up until this moment, have largely been driven by curiosity. There are things I want to do and see for the sake of checking off a bucket list. I don't consider myself poly or part of any sexual lifestyle. I am actually most comfortable being a third to a couple, serving as a conduit for their desires. As a result, I've participated in several moresomes and play parties, though usually with no more than eight people in attendance. There's a sense of collusive intimacy at small events that I particularly enjoy, a moment when everyone is sinfully in sync. During these moments, a thought enters my head: "Am I really doing this?"

Before the party, I'd put on *Eyes Wide Shut* (1999) and listened to its soundtrack while getting ready. I was admittedly seduced by the film's premise. In the decades since the film's release, sex clubs have drawn from Stanley Kubrick's visuals to stage their own versions of his depraved underworld. Ironically, *Eyes Wide Shut* has become an aesthetic shorthand for erotic exclusivity, secrecy, and high-gloss transgression—the very qualities that Kubrick meant to unsettle viewers with, not glamorize. The film's masked orgy is chilling and precisely choreographed. What makes the scene compelling isn't the sex, but the looming danger that Tom Cruise's Bill Hartford is in. Bill isn't just a voyeur; he's an intruder. In hindsight, I realized that the film's erotic charge comes from that emotional subtext. We feel Bill's fear and uncertainty secondhand. The audience is thrilled and frightened by the possibility of him being exposed. At the party, I felt none of those feelings, precisely because there was nothing to fear. A good and safe sex party should, in fact, try to eradicate as much uncertainty as possible, from screening to clear consent protocols.

At the party, it occurred to me that I should've rewatched *Caligula* (1979), not *Eyes Wide Shut*, beforehand. Funded by *Penthouse* founder Bob Guccione and featuring adult film actors in its hardcore scenes, *Caligula* offers a different kind of spectacle—one that's unapologetically lurid and grotesque. One particular orgy scene plays like a dare to the viewer: a tableau of sexual excess where the actors seem to challenge the camera to keep filming. Watching the full cut in theaters, I couldn't look away. "This isn't sexy," I thought. "This is transgressive."

Here, however, there was no sense of transgression. Clusters of couples were fucking around the suite, but the sex didn't coalesce into a *Caligula*-like clusterfuck. Physical proximity didn't translate to intimacy,

in or out of the bedroom. Partners remained coupled up. Singles mingled among themselves. In the social area, people sat at polite distances. The mood felt more observational than participatory, more restrained than charged. There was too much drinking and too little dancing. I briefly shimmied up next to a woman who immediately propositioned me without acknowledging my partner. "You're totally his type," she said, gesturing toward her boyfriend. I wasn't sure how to say no, so I just blurted out: "Oh! I just wanted to dance!"

Maybe it was my expectations for the event. I'd hoped it would ooze erotic tension or at least flirt with chaos. This particular party, which catered mostly to straight, committed couples, might've been a fluke. Or maybe my qualms with it reflected a deeper tension that sex parties are always negotiating: the line between aestheticized transgression and actual erotic disruption.

Group sex was once a political act, a staged rejection of nuclear family norms. Orgies aren't meant to be comfortably inviting (especially not for monogamous-ish couples desperate for a night of debauchery). But today, most sex clubs have evolved into just that. They are consumptive experiences masquerading as exclusive "communities" for bourgeois hedonism. Whether rooted in exclusion, like SNCTM in Beverly Hills and its promise of "unrivaled luxury for the discerning few" with memberships priced in the tens of thousands, or framed as inclusive celebrations of "illuminated eroticism," as NYC's Chemistry claims, these spaces have tamed and commodified the radical essence of group sex. Much in the way that ethical nonmonogamy (or ENM) has morphed into a marriage-saving trend, sex parties now run the risk of being "sublimated into simple lifestyle politics," as Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite writes in her 2024 *London Review of Books* piece "Indoor Sport."

In his book *The Agony of Eros* (2012), the philosopher Byung-Chul Han bemoans how love—and, by extension, eros—is being ruined by capitalism: "In the age of the 'quickie,' the casual encounter, and sex as stress-relief, sexuality is losing all negativity, too. The wholesale absence of negativity is degrading love into an object of consumption, a matter of hedonistic calculation. The desire for the Other is giving way to the comfort of the Same.”

Han directs his ire toward modern dating culture, which is defined by optimization and immediacy. Dating apps create a marketplace out of desire; potential lovers can be scrolled through and shopped for like products. Social media accelerates this flattening effect, collapsing erotic distance by reducing spontaneity into predictable routine. Even something as unruly as group sex now comes with logistics: buying tickets, coordinating costumes, syncing calendars. There’s typically a screening or a referral process to attend. But what happens when the sex party becomes just another prescheduled night out?

Even smaller gatherings, I’ve learned, can feel surprisingly choreographed. At one of the first moresomes I ever attended, the host welcomed me by asking me to strip and shower within 10 minutes of arriving. “Let’s wash our pussies,” she said brightly, then handed me a fresh toothbrush and a roll of floss. Hygiene, it seemed, was the foreplay. A couple in their mid-40s once told me about a sex club they’d visited in Japan, where everyone lined up to shower before anything began. “We were totally taken aback,” the husband said. “My wife had already done her makeup and didn’t want to mess it up, but we were getting weird stares, so we had to jump in.”

I’m not opposed to these hygienic overtures, but after speaking with (mostly straight) people who frequent and host these events, it’s clear that most sex parties are, as Han writes, “a matter of hedonistic calculation.” Contained chaos is the goal. Consent, comfort, and a certain degree of intimate predictability are the hosts’ top priorities. “The parties should always be about the single ladies, not the guys,” says Ben, a straight man in his 50s who’s been hosting sex parties in Southern California since 2015. “I’m selective with couples because they come with a lot of baggage.” For Ben, running a successful sex party is no different than hosting any good party.

Ben doesn’t play at his own events; he’s too busy making introductions and ensuring people connect socially before anything else unfolds. “Most of the time, people are just sitting around having drinks and talking, while a few in the back are going at it,” he says. “Usually, that happens very late.” Ben, however, pushes back against the idea that ENM and sex parties are mainstream, even as events have grown increasingly commodified: “I’d say that it’s probably only about 1 percent of the population who are interested in this stuff, and it’s overrepresented in big cities.”

THERE MAY BE GLIMMERS OF DESIRE, BUT THEY EXIST WITHIN THE LAW AND ORDER OF THE PRODUCTION ITSELF: BRIEF FLASHES CONTAINED BY STRUCTURE, ETIQUETTE, AND CONSENT PROTOCOLS.

There may be glimmers of desire, but they exist within the law and order of the production itself: brief flashes contained by structure, etiquette, and consent protocols. The larger the event, the more rigid or performative those mechanisms might feel. Whereas in smaller gatherings, it’s easier for everyone to slip into an organic rhythm. “For me, it’s usually after those performances, once the initial tension fades, that the more intimate, genuine connections can happen,” Ian, my boyfriend’s friend, tells me. “We can relax, laugh, and question the whole setup.”

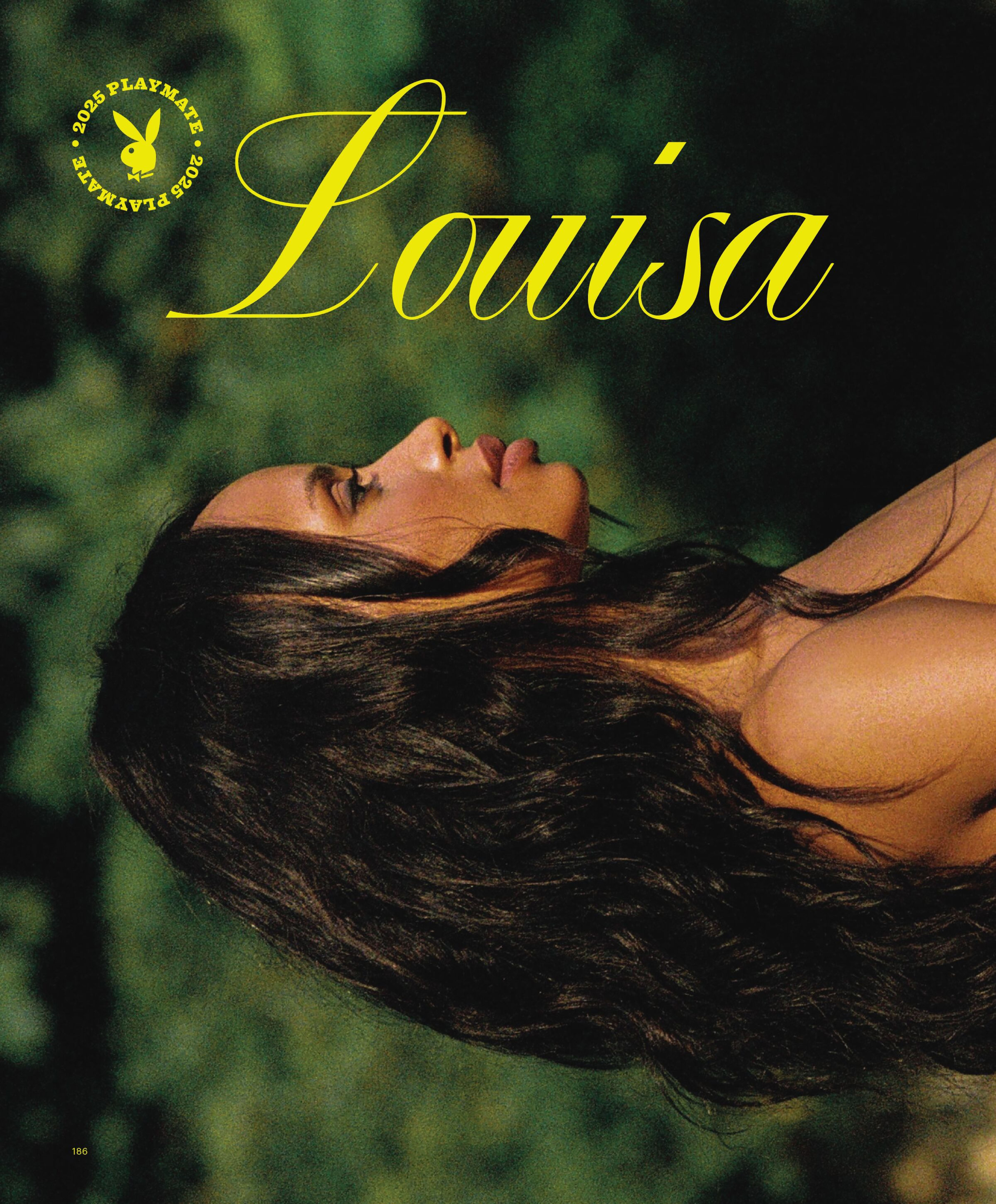
Since I’ve been questioning the setup from the start, I wonder if I’d already closed myself off to the possibility of surprise. Did I arrive that night more as a critic than an eager participant? Still, the tension I sensed wasn’t just internal. It speaks to a broader contradiction built into the structure of sex parties—something I likely won’t attend again, not without knowing who the hosts are firsthand.

The cultural theorist Lauren Berlant captures this tension in *On the Inconvenience of Other People* (2022), a title that perfectly echoed my own experience at the party: “The optimism that sex tends to trigger is for an impossible state of things: the perfect rhythm of being in and out of control, of being open and closed in the right or bearable ways, achieving a smooth, unambivalent holding environment for our own and the world’s coherence.”

If hell is other people, then maybe an orgy is another room in hell. The presence of others inevitably disturbs our own delicate rhythms, whether at a penthouse sex party or a co-op grocery store. It’s the price of living in a society, of partaking in group activities. Still, I find it beautiful that we turn to sex to yearn for that impossible state of things: a utopia where intimacy and care are reciprocated and fair. If it takes an unsexy sex party to remind me of that longing—for eroticism, yes, but also for the world’s coherence—then so be it.

2025 PLAYMATE • 2025 PLAYMATE •

Louisa



SWEET AS HONEY AND ENTIRELY HER OWN: MISS OCTOBER **LOUISA AMA**.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY **JO PESCH**

At 26, Louisa embodies a rare combination of mountain-forged resilience and worldly elegance. Born in Ghana, she moved to Austria at four when her mother remarried, settling in Eben im Pongau—a village where she and her family were often the first Black people whom locals had ever encountered. Rather than shrinking from the attention, this experience shaped her into someone unafraid to take up space in the world.

Her sanctuary is the Austrian Alps, where she skis, hikes, and swims, activities nurtured from early ages by her stepfather. Those childhood summers also taught her to make honey-butter bread from scratch (her grandmother's special recipe), to distinguish edible mushrooms from poisonous ones (courtesy of her grandfather), and to find peace in solitude. "You can be who you want to be up there," she reflects about those formative years.

Working now as a personal assistant in Salzburg, Louisa operates on a simple philosophy: She listens to her body. If something brings happiness and energy, she pursues it. If it drains her, she says, "I take my distance." After leaving home at 15, she promised herself to live authentically, surrounding herself only with people who respect and motivate her. When melancholy strikes, she spends time with high-energy friends who remind her why life is worth celebrating.

Things that bring her joy include her family and friends and giving gifts, just because. "I keep a gift list for people close to me," she says, smiling. "If you tell me you loved something when you were a child, I write it down, and every time I see it, I buy it and give it the next time I see you. You don't have to wait for a birthday or special occasion." Her friends are also the lucky recipients of her culinary prowess and sharing her culture through cuisine. "I love to make traditional Ghanaian peanut soup with fufu for everyone," she says.

Louisa gives herself things, too, such as grace, evidenced by how she's learned to love parts of herself she once struggled with. Her natural afro, once a source of insecurity, is now worn as a crown.

Her biggest inspiration is her sister Rebecca, three years older and living in Vienna. Their bond, difficult during different childhood phases, has deepened into something unshakable. "I can call her at 3 a.m., and she takes time to listen," Louisa says and adds that her sister pushes and encourages her to make the most of life.

"When you wake up every day and say, 'I love my life,'" she says, grinning, "that's a life well lived." —SEAN EVANS

What's something people assume about you that's totally wrong?

I would say that they think I want attention, but really I love quiet. I am someone who doesn't need to be seen because the right people will feel my energy.

What drew you to the *Playboy* world—not just the title, but the experience?

Playboy is a brand that lets women be who they are in the way that society did not want them to be seen—confident, feminine, sexy.

What part of yourself were you hoping people would see when you became a Playmate?

That I love myself the way I am and the way I was made and that I hope I inspire young women to be who they are.

If your bedroom had a name, what would it be?

The Secret Garden. Soft lights, chill music, and everybody feels comfortable.

What's the most intimate thing someone could do for you that doesn't involve touching?

Seeing me for who I am.

If your mood right now were a piece of lingerie, how would you describe it?

A silk Champagne-colored lingerie with a little secret.

What part of your personality is your biggest turn-on?

My confidence and that I always try to make everybody around me happy.

What song makes you feel like the hottest person in the room?

"I Want to Be Your Lover" by Prince. It's fun, it's sexy, and it has rhythm.

Whom do you become after midnight?

I'm the same but a little bit softer and a little bit vulnerable. I don't feel like I need to be strong.

What are you most passionate about?

Making the world a little bit kinder and showing people that they don't need to earn respect, that you can just get it, because everybody deserves it. Yay!

How was your experience with your first *Playboy* shoot?

It was amazing. The organization, the photographer, the stylist, and their assistant planned everything perfectly. I felt comfortable and sexy, and I felt like they really planned it for my body in a way of showing the best sides of me. It's just the truth.

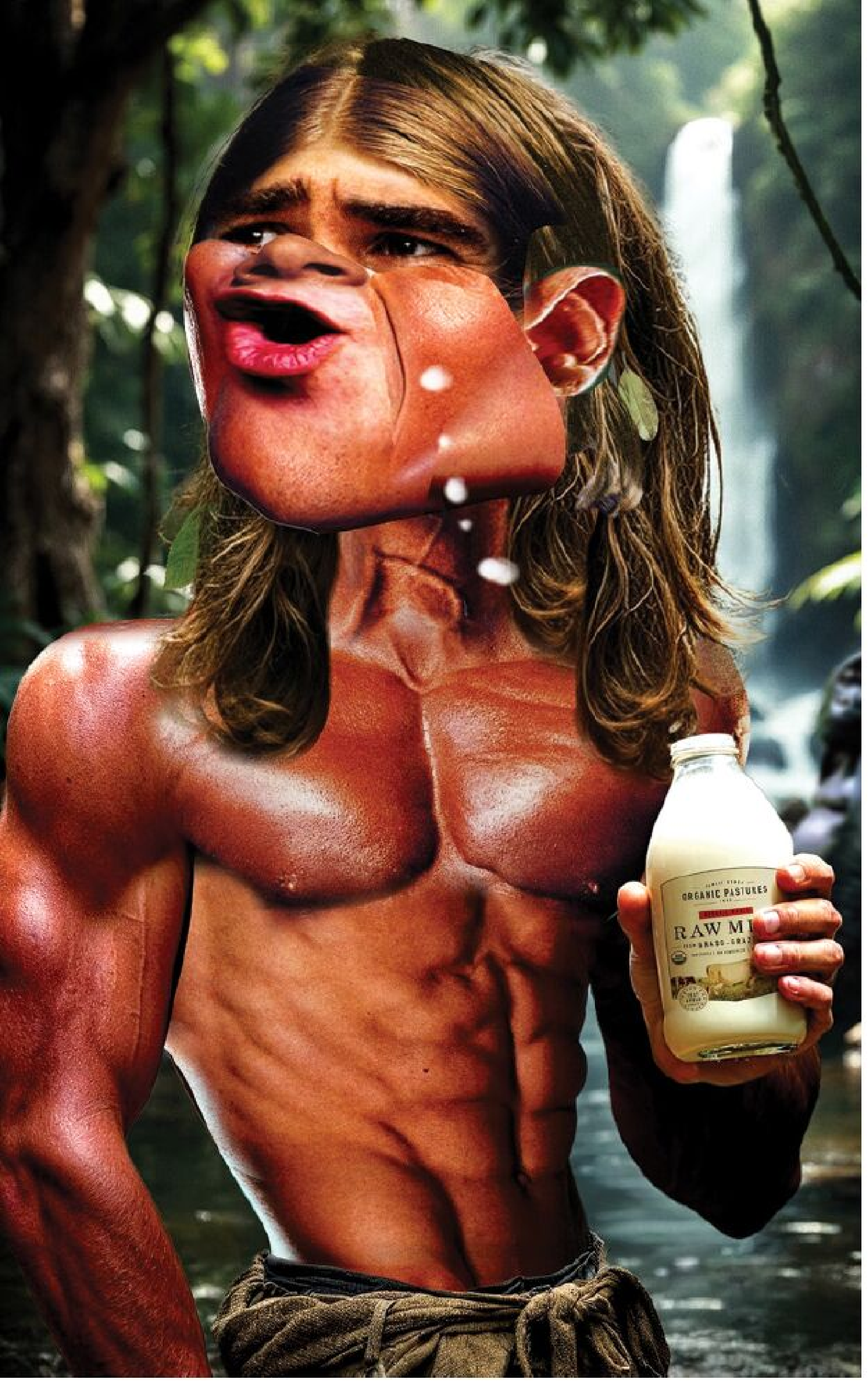
STYLING BY **NOÉMIE NEUENS**. HAIR AND MAKEUP BY **MARLY BIERHUIZEN**.

THE NEW MAN: A MAN'S FIELD GUIDE TO MEN'S MEN, FOR MEN

BEHOLD, THE MODERN MAN!

Joe Rogan was just the start. After a decade of terminal online-ness, the manosphere has spawned a rogues' gallery of would-be philosophers, hustlers, streamers, and pseudo-Tarzans. A guide to all the types of guy (and a few gals) you don't want to become.

SATIRE BY **TOMMY CRAGGS AND EAMON WHALEN**
ILLUSTRATIONS BY **EDDIE GUY**



FULLY OPTIMIZED PRIMAL NEO-VITALIST MAHA TARZAN WARRIOR

PERSONA A new-age Tarzan, part bro-scientist, part fitness influencer. Once jokingly called a "body Nazi," he has ensured the joke is no longer funny. He eats raw organs and suns his scrotum; if prions don't hollow out his brain, melanoma has dibs on his balls. He is a rigorous practitioner of semen retention, as if seeking out new frontiers in being full of himself.

GOALS To purify the male body and restore it to premodern glory (with the help of anabolics).

HABITATS The raw-milk aisle at Erewhon, the Capitol Rotunda, esoteric nutrition conferences, county jail, sunning his ass crack at dawn on a beach in Sayulita.

APPEARANCE Always shirtless, usually sunburned, "naturally" shredded, yet somehow even more soy than his plant-based foils.

FOUNDATIONAL TAKES Our modern world is a vibrational wasteland replete with toxicity, from seed oils to sunscreen, toothpaste to receipts, oat milk to underwear. Fear not: The MAHA warrior promises salvation. Soon you'll be eating tallow fries at Steak 'n Shake and drinking Coke with real sugar again.

HUSTLES Freeze-dried organ supplements, alpha-male coaching packages, wellness retreats, and rebranding your Berkeley aunt's naturopathy as radical masculinity.

CANON RFK Jr., Weston Price, Joel Salatin.

RED-PILLED ZOOMER TWITCH STREAMER

PERSONA A commander of a bafflingly huge army of teenage boys, the kind who spend their days glued to Twitch with occasional breaks for anime porn. Once, this streamer was a harmless kid running a *Call of Duty* lobby. Now he dabbles in Holocaust revisionism and showers America's would-be führer with tributes.

GOALS To gin up outrage, mainline offense, hook your teenage son into online gambling, and prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that the internet was mankind's worst idea yet.

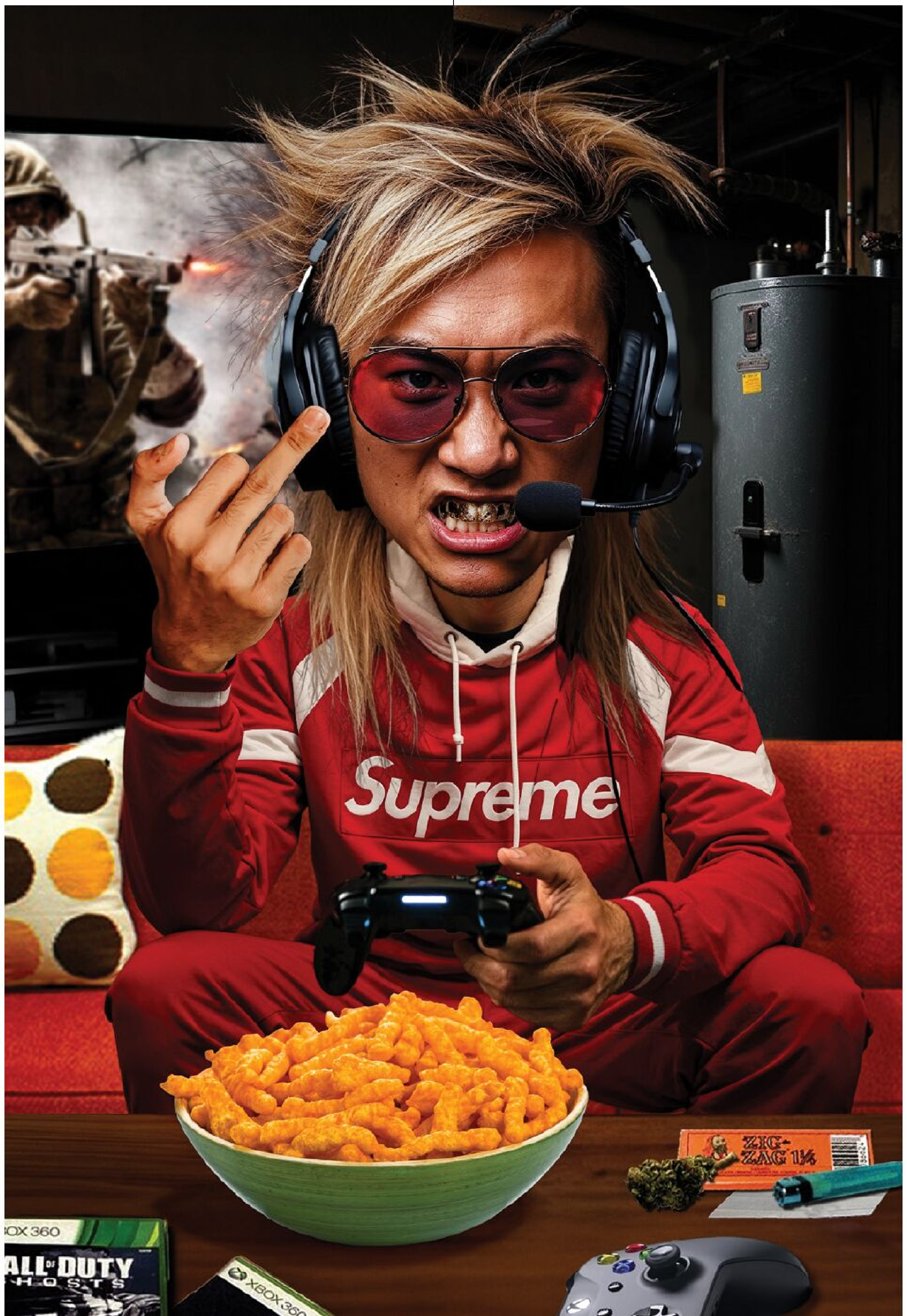
HABITATS Always live, usually doing one of the following: promoting Ye's "Heil Hitler" track; clowning with up-and-coming rappers; running pickup with washed-up NBA vets; smoking cigars with crooked mayors; feuding endlessly with other streamers; or arguing that Hitler was "actually a good leader."

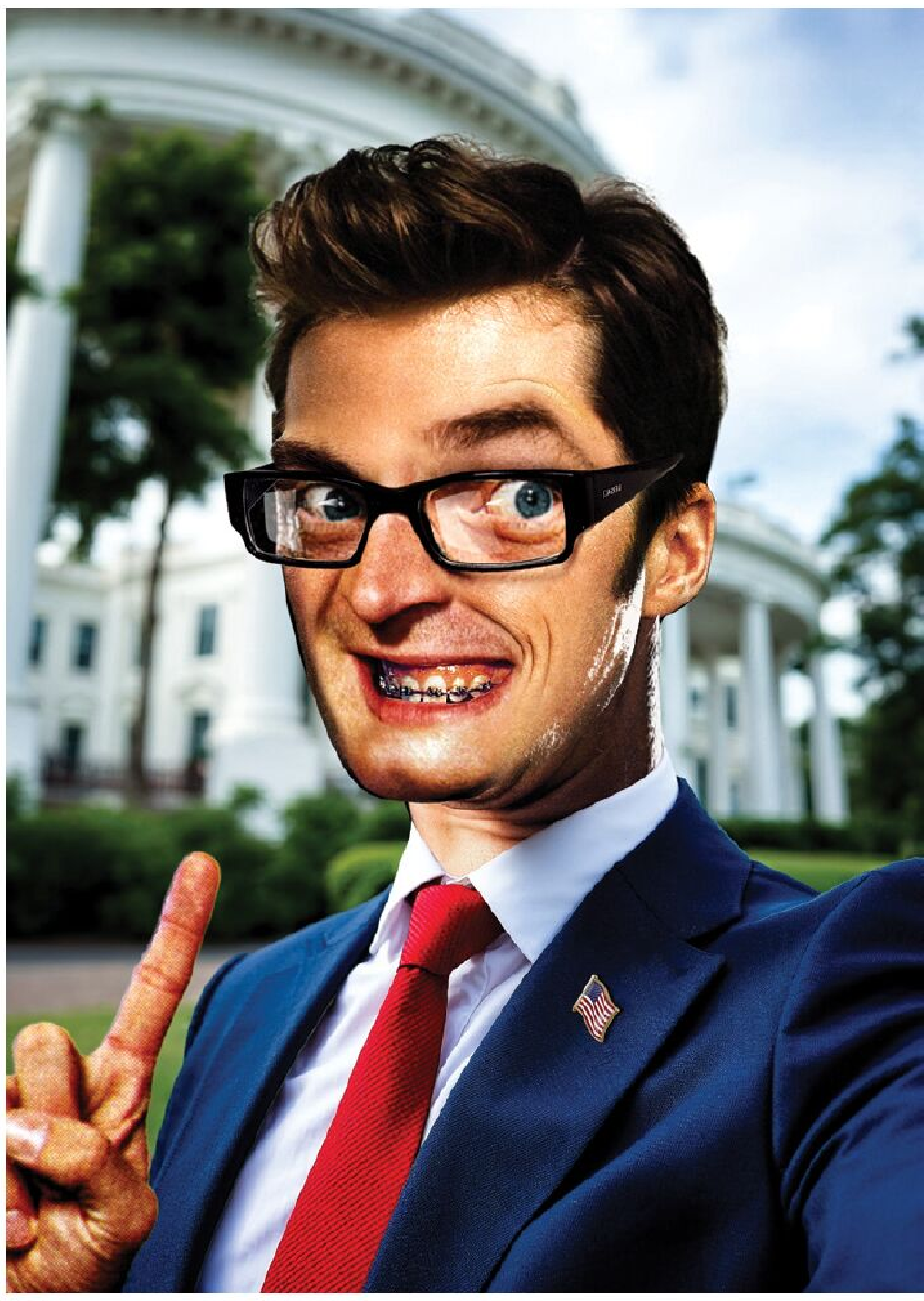
APPEARANCE The basement-dwelling gamer archetype, only styled for the *XXL* "Freshman" cover.

FOUNDATIONAL TAKES Just the dumbest shit you can imagine, reflecting a moral sense that seems to have been extracted from the barely descended testicles of the worst teenage boy you know.

HUSTLES "Grinding," aka broadcasting his life on camera for at least eight hours a day, every day; clout, engagement; "The Algorithm." Revenue streams include Super Chat donations, which fans pay to shout slurs; gambling-app endorsements; crypto pump-and-dumps; and every other scam that the 2020s casino economy serves up.

CANON Jake and Logan Paul; MrBeast in form, Nick Fuentes in content.





THE DON JR. JUNIOR

PERSONA An up-and-comer of the MAGA movement: a credentialed grotesque fueled by caviar bumps and Tucker Carlson, shuffling between podcasts in search of a White House job, a shady crypto play, or whatever it was Matt Gaetz was accused of.

GOALS To straddle the line between the MAGA base and the White House...and then snort it.

HABITATS Mar-a-Lago, 1600 Pennsylvania Ave., Hooters.

APPEARANCE SEC tailgate on its third handle of Fireball meets the World Series of Poker meets divorce court.

FOUNDATIONAL TAKES God, guns, and the Great Replacement.

HUSTLES Ambassadorships, campus organizations, consulting kickbacks, meme coins.

CANON Donald J. Trump, Donald Trump Jr., Barron Trump, Eric Tru—eh, probably not.

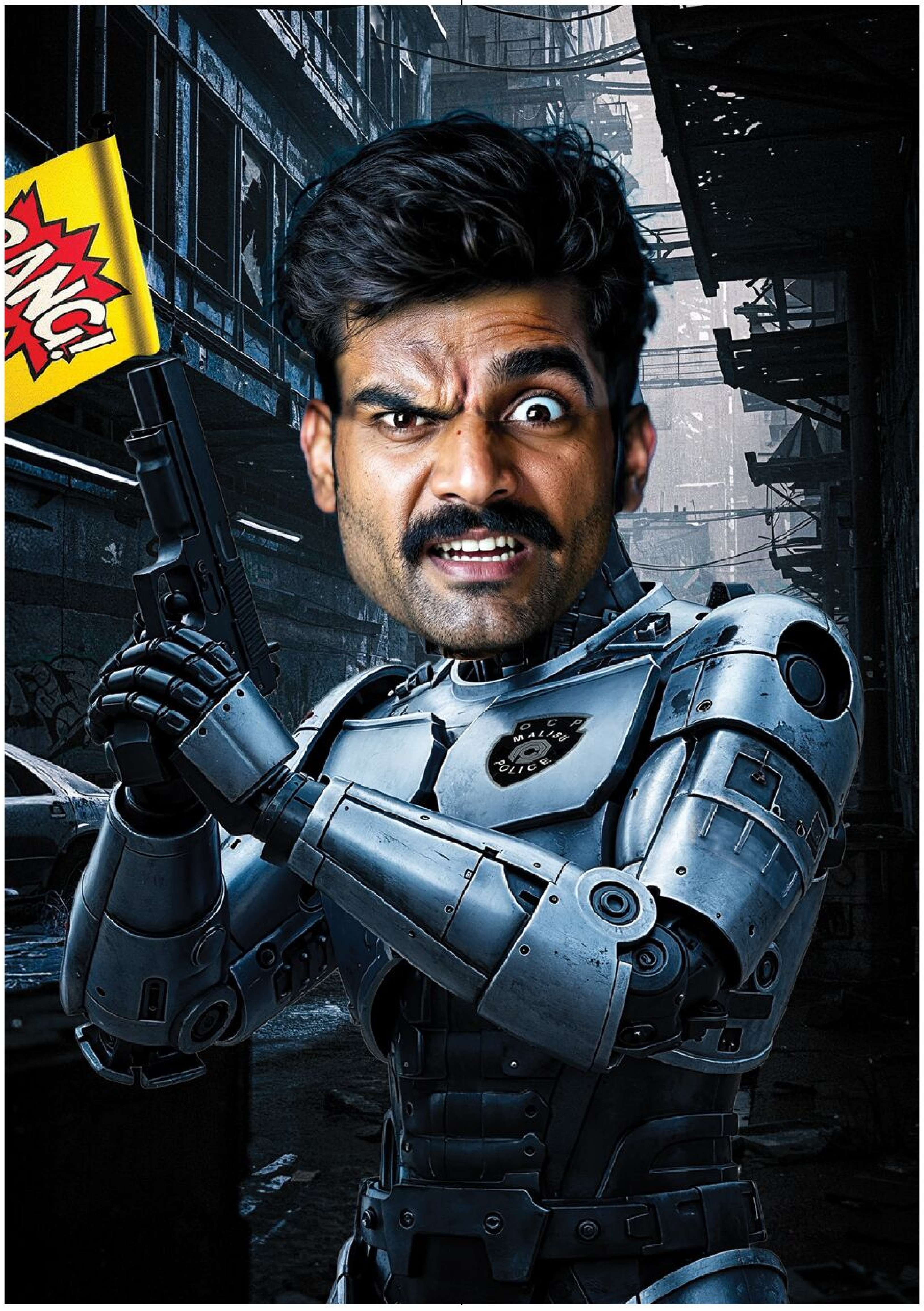
THE TECHNOFASH

PERSONA A friendless, ovoid baron of Silicon Valley. Got rich because the federal government turned the Bay Area land where Leland Stanford's horses once did their rutting into a giant R&D lab, then mistook his own windfall for proof he was among the chosen. Sworn enemy of woke, he's still fighting the culture wars of 2020. Views *RoboCop* as a blueprint for police reform and will never stop working to make the entire country more closely resemble an airport security line. Unwittingly, socialism's best recruiter.

GOALS Total information awareness, especially as it pertains to anyone he doesn't like.

HABITATS Pacific Heights, Malibu, Singapore, New Zealand bunkers, Mordor, racist group chats.

APPEARANCE TRT and experimental research chemicals can do plenty, but they can't fix weird.



FOUNDATIONAL TAKES Anything he hasn't yet disrupted is inherently evil. Immortality will be achieved in his lifetime.

HUSTLES Stock manipulation, zero-interest-rate loans, government contracts, seasteading.

CANON Peter Thiel, George Gilder.

THE NO-LONGER-ANONYMOUS COURT PHILOSOPHER

PERSONA An aspiring Übermensch and would-be Rasputin, kicked out of a Ph.D. program for being too weird. Once he wrote serial manifestos decrying democracy and egalitarianism behind an internet pseudonym. Now he is the celebrity theorist of the new political order, posing leather-jacketed for magazine photographs in which he stares into the middle distance like some sort of creep.

GOALS To rewrite the doctrines of male supremacy in language so tedious and fantastical that only people who grew up reading role-playing game instruction manuals could appreciate them.

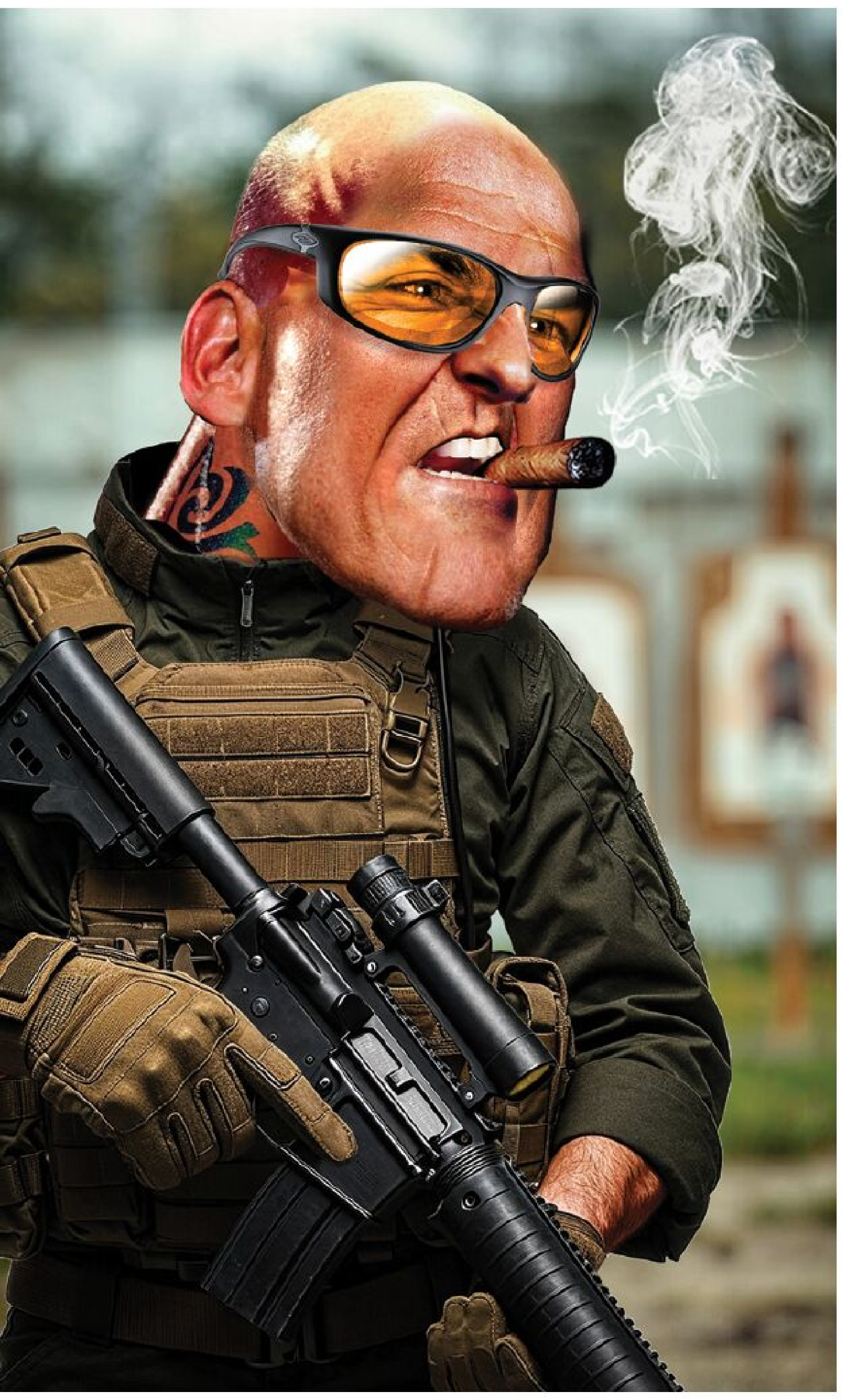
HABITATS J.D. Vance's Twitter follows, Steve Sailer's comments section, *New York Times* profiles, any dorm room with a copy of *Bronze Age Mindset*.

APPEARANCE Somewhere between jocks cosplaying as nerds and nerds cosplaying as jocks. Either way: tragic.

FOUNDATIONAL TAKES Everything that comes out of DC, Hollywood, or the Ivy League is a psy-op on behalf of a decadent globalist elite to make you gay or something.

HUSTLES Bespoke hardcover leather-bound books of race science, red-pilling bohemian 20-somethings in Dimes Square, befriending the next vice president of the United States.

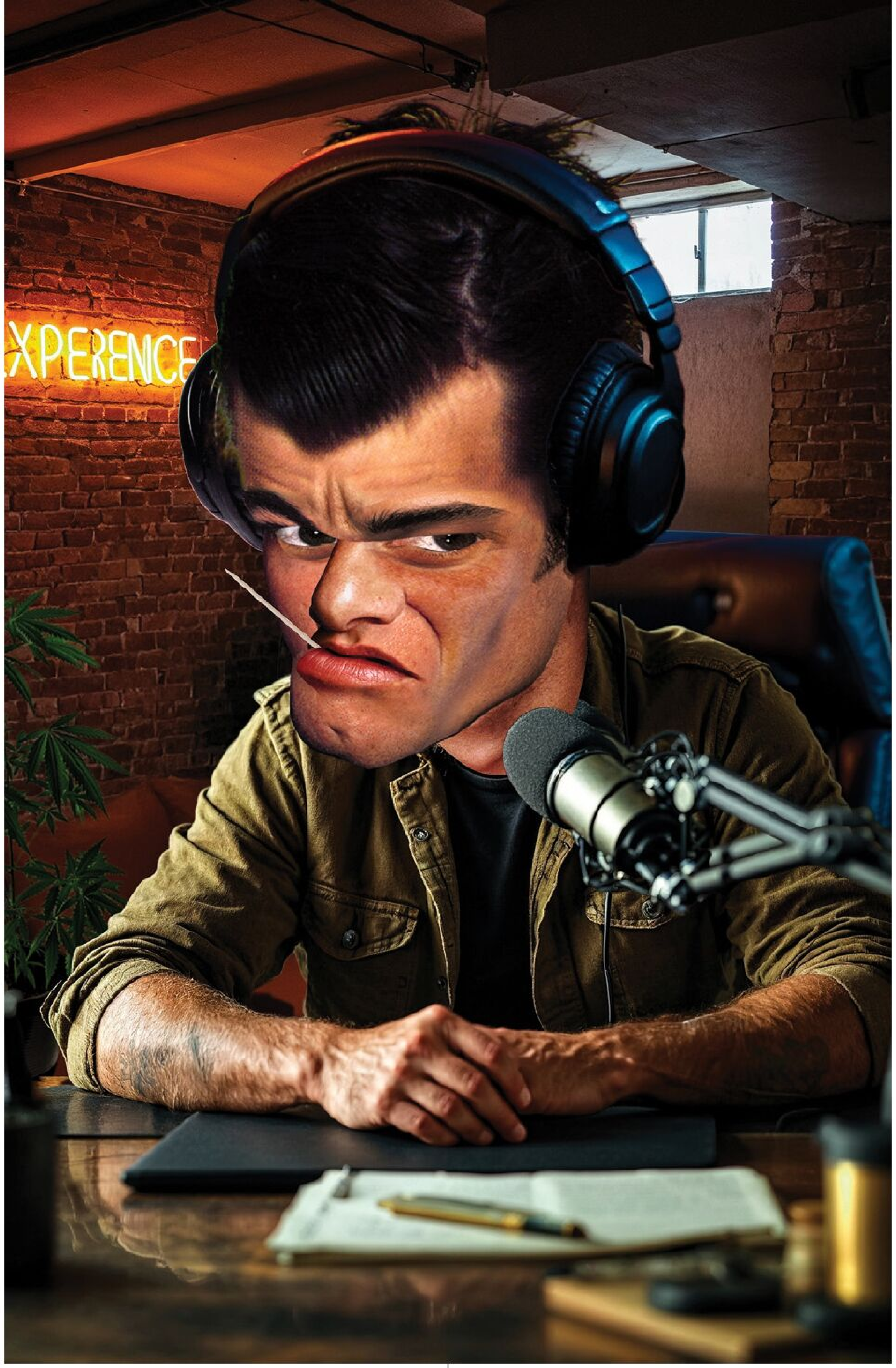
CANON Plato, Nietzsche, Evola, Tolkien, Yarvin.



THE OPERATOR

PERSONA Rambo with a podcast, who (along with many others) fired the bullet that killed bin Laden. He'll tell you about it if you buy his memoir, which is called *Code* or *Warrior*. Believes lethality to be the highest virtue.

GOALS To rehabilitate our disastrous war on terror, only in the guise of engaging in free-thinking dissent against a corrupt bureaucracy and woke generals. Men, it's OK to cry, as long as you have confirmed kills to back up those tears.



HABITATS Gun ranges, jujitsu gyms, padded podcast studios. Also, courts-martial.

APPEARANCE Bald.

FOUNDATIONAL TAKES Eddie Gallagher is a war hero. You're probably a loser. "Without guys like me, we're all commies."

HUSTLES Tactical coffee, tactical beer, tactical cigars, tactical gummy bears.

CANON Pete Hegseth, Erik Prince, Michael Flynn Sr.

THE SATELLITE ROGAN

PERSONA Legacy media is collapsing; liberalism is decomposing; nobody trusts "experts." Into the breach stumbles this next-gen podcaster and influencer, tripping groin-first into a lucrative career as a Charlie Rose for bros. Thanks to him, you can say "retard" again.

GOALS To play useful idiot for the regime—and make sure the message hits young men by the millions.

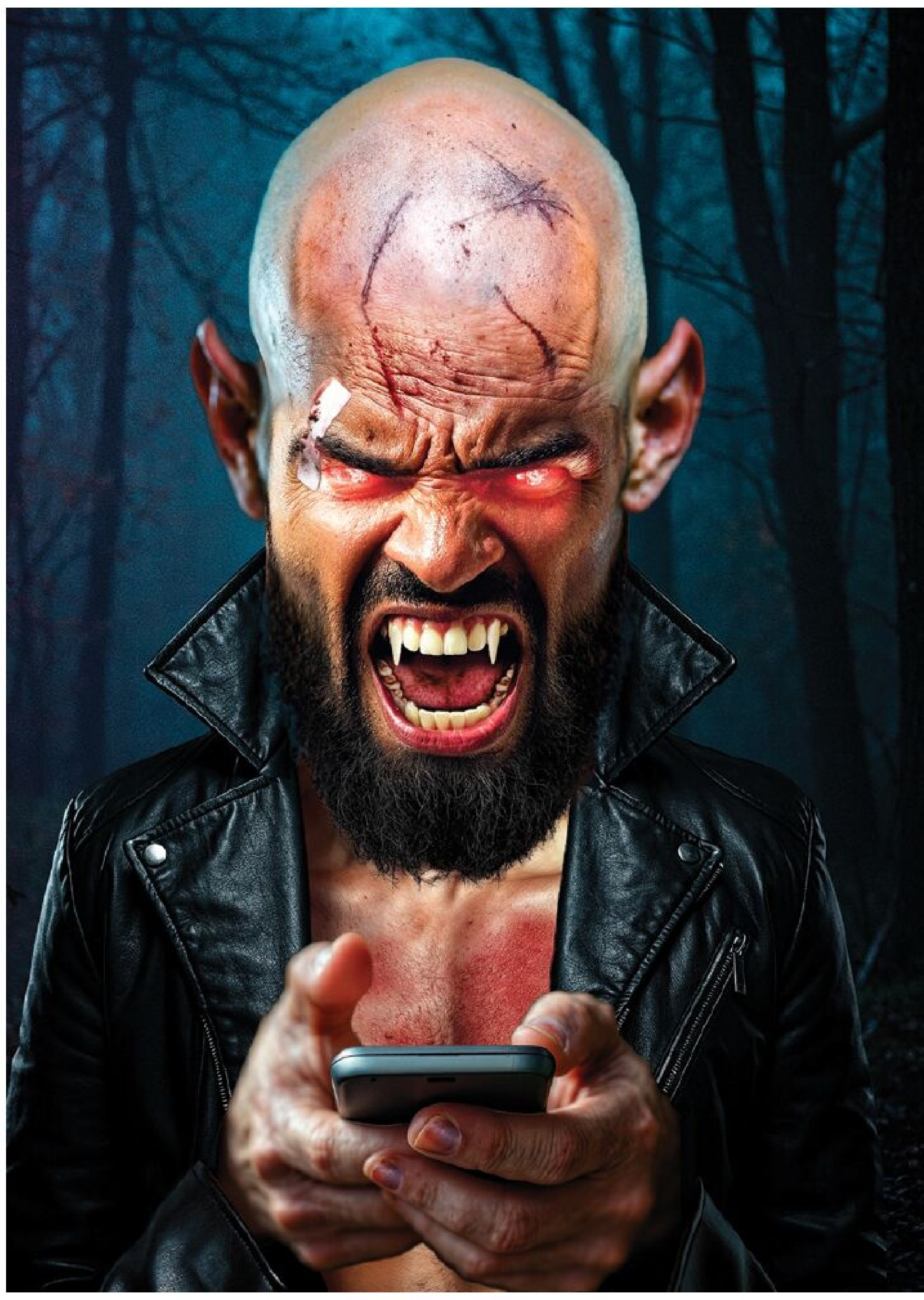
HABITATS A man cave oasis in the great American news desert.

APPEARANCE He styles himself as a type of normal guy from regional America: college football booster; bayou airboat tour guide; pomade-slicked Williamsburg barber who has given a few too many high-and-tights; Red Sox talk radio host with a permanently underbuttoned shirt and a lifetime ban from all the college bars in Suffolk County, Massachusetts. Shorter than he wants you to believe.

FOUNDATIONAL TAKES "Can't you take a joke, bro?"; "I'm just asking questions."

HUSTLES Making authoritarian politics feel like a Phi Delt party, Patreon bait, gambling-app money.

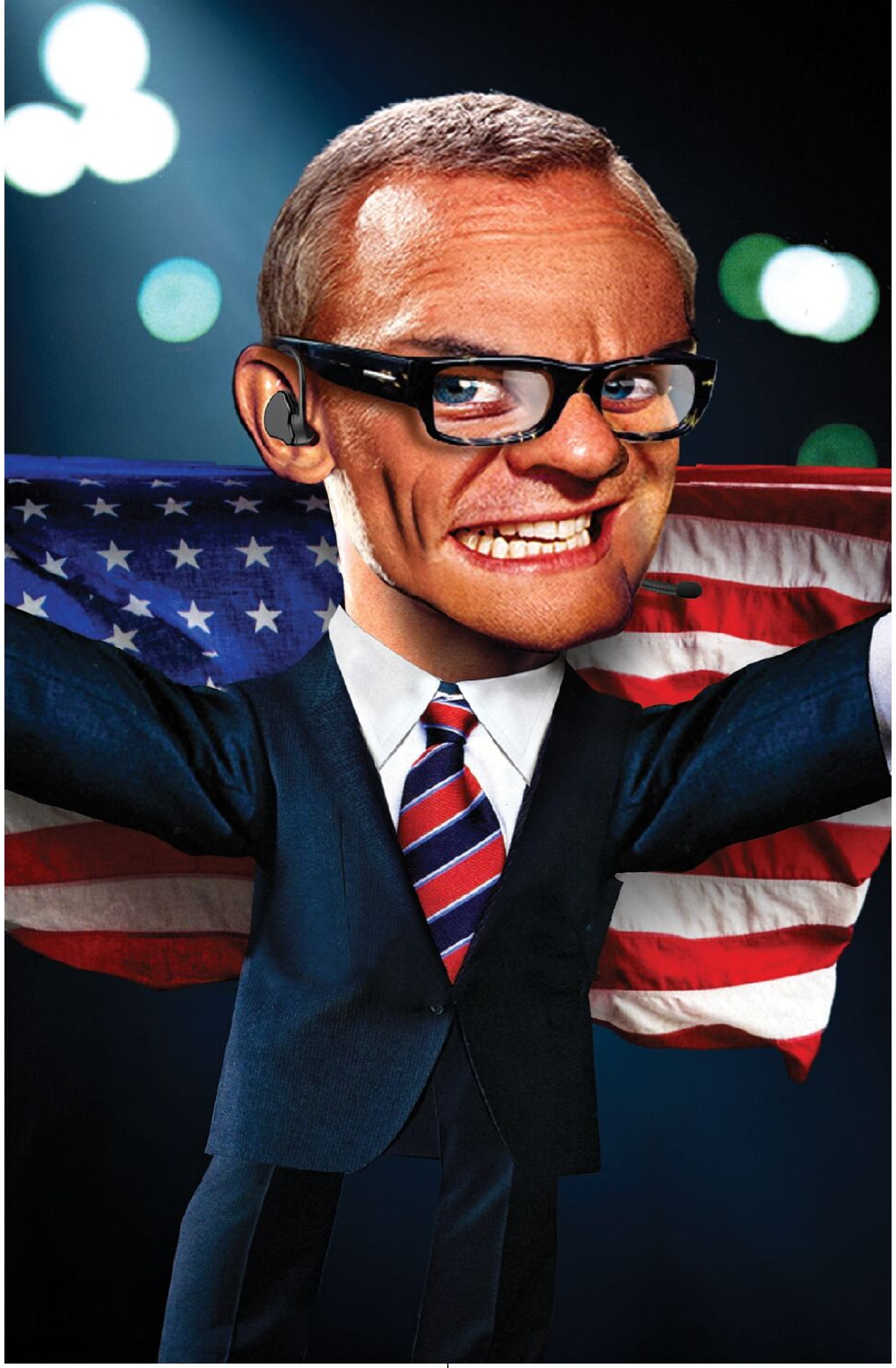
CANON Joe Rogan (duh), Theo Von, Dave Portnoy.



THE ANDREW TATE LOST BOY

PERSONA An MMA fighter, bodybuilder, or gym rat preaching "discipline" and "self-mastery"—right before punching someone on camera. Loves sleeping with women with high body counts. Hates women with high body counts.

GOALS To harangue, berate, and expose "modern women" and, at the same time, to make men feel so inadequate and insecure that they'll believe the bullshit on offer.



HABITATS Sliding into women's DMs in between editing clips of themselves yelling at women on camera.

APPEARANCE A walking restraining order in a silk shirt.

FOUNDATIONAL TAKES Feminism ruined women and did even more damage to men—they're the proof.

HUSTLES Coaching sessions on "debating" women. T-shirts that say "slut." E-books like *Why Women Deserve Less.*

CANON Andrew Tate, Tucker Max, Neil Strauss, Roosh V, Rollo Tomassi.

THE FREEDOM FINANCE SIGMA GRINDSETTER

PERSONA He poses in front of private jets, hangs around fighters who can't stand him, and communicates with the masses through half-literate Instagram koans about money and family that make Dr. Phil sound like Thoreau. Credit where it's due: He makes wealth look miserable.

GOALS To pick himself up by *your* bootstraps.

HABITATS Ranges from "Ace Rothstein if he sold time-shares" to "Michael Scott, lost in the Supreme store."

APPEARANCE Onstage in the convention center of a midsize American city, earpiece in place, addressing an audience of rubes and marks who paid thousands to be told that the only thing keeping them from their riches is their attitude. Instagram.

FOUNDATIONAL TAKES Mindset is everything. Taxation is theft. Poor? On you.

HUSTLES From MLMs to NFTs, he's always making sure you're the one left holding the bag. And when in doubt: coaching sessions. Always coaching sessions.

CANON Jordan Belfort, Robert Kiyosaki, Patrick Bateman, Milton Friedman, Ayn Rand, and, inexplicably, Mr. Bean.

THE FILLER-FACED MAGA ÜBER-FEMME

PERSONA Eva Bronzer over here made her little bargain with the patriarchy and then set about making sure no other woman could ever escape it. Her reward? Front-row seats with the most chinless men in American history. After a long day of doing fascism, she unwinds by donning hideous prints and making restaurant servers cry.

GOALS To shatter the glass ceiling on sadism and brutishness.

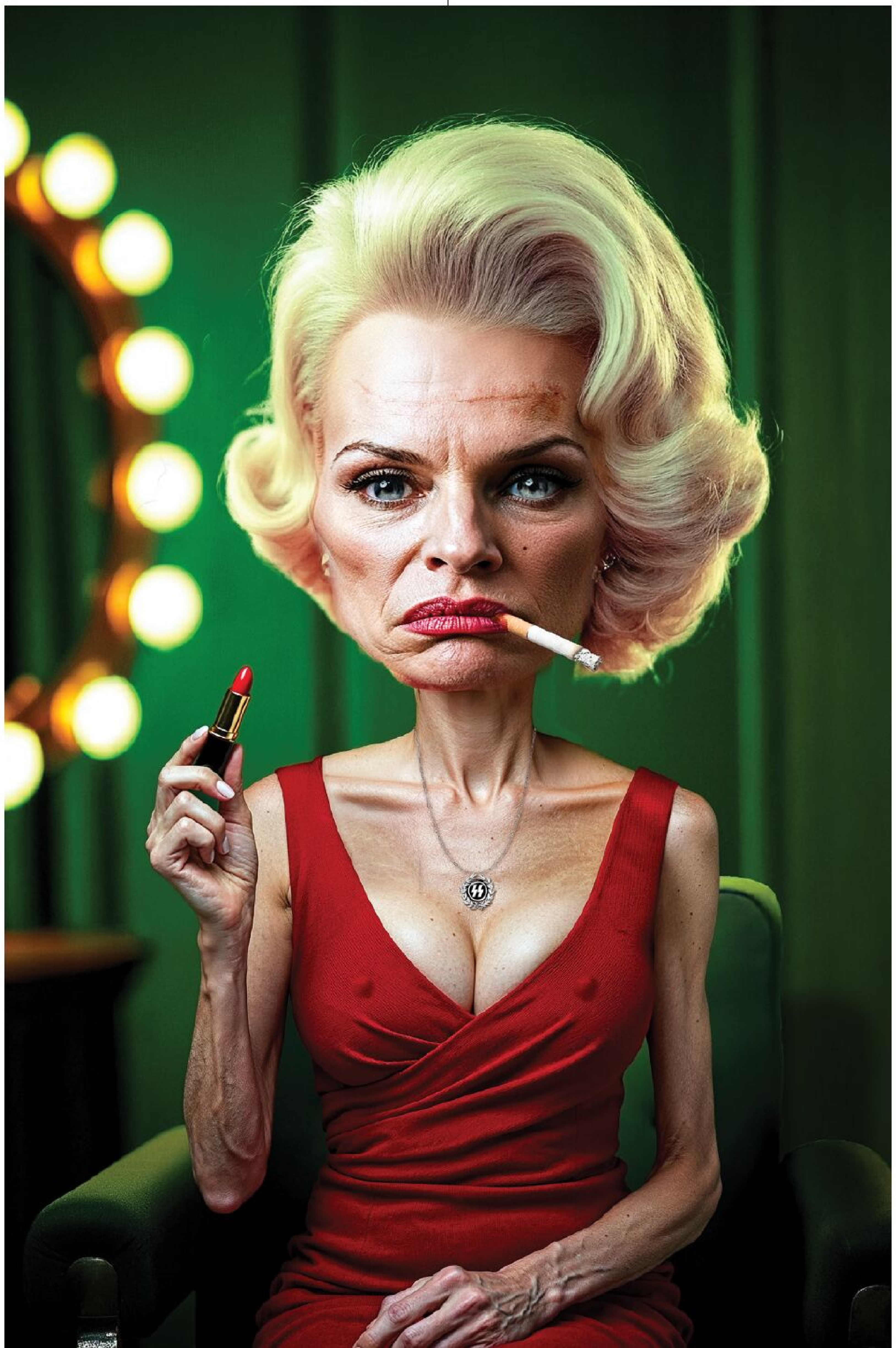
HABITATS Fox News green rooms. Photo ops at detention camps, smiling.

APPEARANCE Like the top news anchor in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho. Hair extensions that look like they are made from small animals. Her favorite accessory: children.

FOUNDATIONAL TAKES Unmarried, childless women are lesbians.

HUSTLES Goopified anti-feminist propaganda campaigns designed to spread outrageous lies about crime, immigration, and the sexual dynamism of Stephen Miller.

CANON Sarah Palin, Phyllis Schlafly, Serena Joy.



THERE IS NO CRISIS OF MEN

The supposed death of masculinity has been greatly exaggerated...again. **By Tommy Craggs**

MEN ARE IN CRISIS, everyone seems to agree. Gender panic is in the air. The causes are still much in dispute, but the symptoms are everywhere you look. The accumulating freak-outs over who gets to play sports and who cannot, based on iron certainties about what is and isn't natural. The incel novelists who bellow about our "feminine, nervous, hysterical, chattering, canting age" and "the reign of mediocrity" it threatens to usher in. The parenting guru who urges boys not to sleep in a feather bed lest the softness and heat encourage them to jerk off, apparently not understanding that a teenage boy would go to town in the hold of the *Edmund Fitzgerald* if given the chance.

It's even starting to feel like war. Young males pledge themselves to restoring masculine virtues, mustering in city centers like unconvincing paramilitaries. Their message: The bygone man is back and on the march, once he catches his breath.

Everything I've described here happened at least a hundred years ago. The hysterias over sports were about women playing them at all. The incel novelist was Henry James. The guru was a gynecologist named Augustus Kinsley Gardner, who hated masturbation almost as much as he hated women. And the paramilitaries? Those were the Boy Scouts. The proudest boys of all.

What is happening today, we have seen before. Men have spent so much of the past century in cycles of crisis and "resolution" that a close observer might well start asking some questions. Why? What is it about masculinity that keeps producing moral panic after moral panic in its name? Is masculinity ever really in crisis, or is the crisis in masculinity itself?

Tristan Bridges, Ph.D., a sociologist at the University of California, Santa Barbara, has some good answers. "These moments usually arise during periods of what I think of as a kind of gender reorganization—when long-standing assumptions about men's advantage are unsettled by social, economic, or political shifts," Bridges writes in an email.

By way of explanation, he takes me on a brief tour of the embattled American man in crisis: from the anxieties over the closing of the frontier, to the chronic instability of the midcentury breadwinner role, to the potent resentments generated as blue-collar workers lost their jobs and women joined the workforce. "These aren't moments when men suddenly 'lost' power," Bridges says. "They're moments when men's structural advantages were publicly questioned symbolically, demographically, or politically."

And at each point, the men-in-crisis story is summoned to the breach. It's not hard to see its purpose. These moments are defined not so much by any significant diminution in the male privilege as by a disruption in how men experience that privilege. Gender advantages that had been ascribed to nature are newly revealed to be the dividends of a social hierarchy. A frenzy ensues in an effort to restore the "naturalness" of the "natural" gender order. Dissonances have to be resolved, scapegoats identified, certain persistent facts of male advantage obscured. The trick of the crisis story is to position men as the pitiable victims of shifting gender dynamics, even while they retain most of their old advantages in wages, in political power, and so on. Effects become causes. The death of so-called men's work in the United States, for instance, wasn't the fault of a violent industrial restructuring in the latter half of the 20th century, the story is here to assure us. It was because of changing gender relations. Not capitalism, in other words. Those bitches over there.

How does it work, exactly? A recent *New York Times* story declares that "Data Shows Boys and Young Men Are Falling Behind," citing college-attendance and labor-participation rates. But look closer: Men still hold significant advantages in labor-force participation, while women's lead in college enrollment began decades ago and coincided with the declining value of college degrees.

Is that evidence of a decline in male capacity? Or is it a sign of a change in the material facts of American life that has made, in Bridges's phrase, "some iterations of masculinity less useful and meaningful" today than previously?

But the misascription is the point. The crisis narrative is performing a sleight of hand, occluding from view all the powerful forces that act on us across the gender spectrum, that in fact shape the spectrum itself, not to mention all the ways that the pressure to conform to hegemonic masculinity is often the source of trouble. And rendered invisible altogether is a simple, unfashionable fact: Masculinity is a power relation, even if the men enjoying its privileges sometimes feel powerless. That's the work of the narrative, ultimately. To hide the power and blame the bad feelings on *the bitches over there.*

ILLUSTRATION BY **EDDIE GUY**

THANK YOU, *India*

A YOUNG NEW YORK CITY PAINTER WELCOMES US INTO HER STUDIO.

BY **MAGDALENE TAYLOR**
PHOTOGRAPHS BY **JOSEFINA SANTOS**

Amid the scrapyards and warehouses and tire shops of industrial East Williamsburg—or maybe it's Bushwick or possibly even Ridgewood, depending on who you ask—painter India Sachi, 25, studies the female form. In the summers, she starts her days early. She works until noon, sketching or researching or putting paint to canvas. Then, when the heat of the day hits its peak, she takes off all her clothes, wets them in the communal sink of her studio building, puts them back on, and lies on the floor until she's cooled off enough to continue the project.

> **"THESE WOMEN THAT APPEAR THROUGHOUT THE PAINTINGS ARE ME PERFORMING HISTORY OR MYTHOLOGY OR SOME SORT OF EROTIC SCENE."**

"I've been making really large-scale paintings that touch on the intersections of mythology and gender, which has always been part of my work," Sachi says. "But I'm really leaning toward using mythology to look at the time that we're in right now. These women that appear throughout the paintings are me performing history or mythology or some sort of erotic scene."

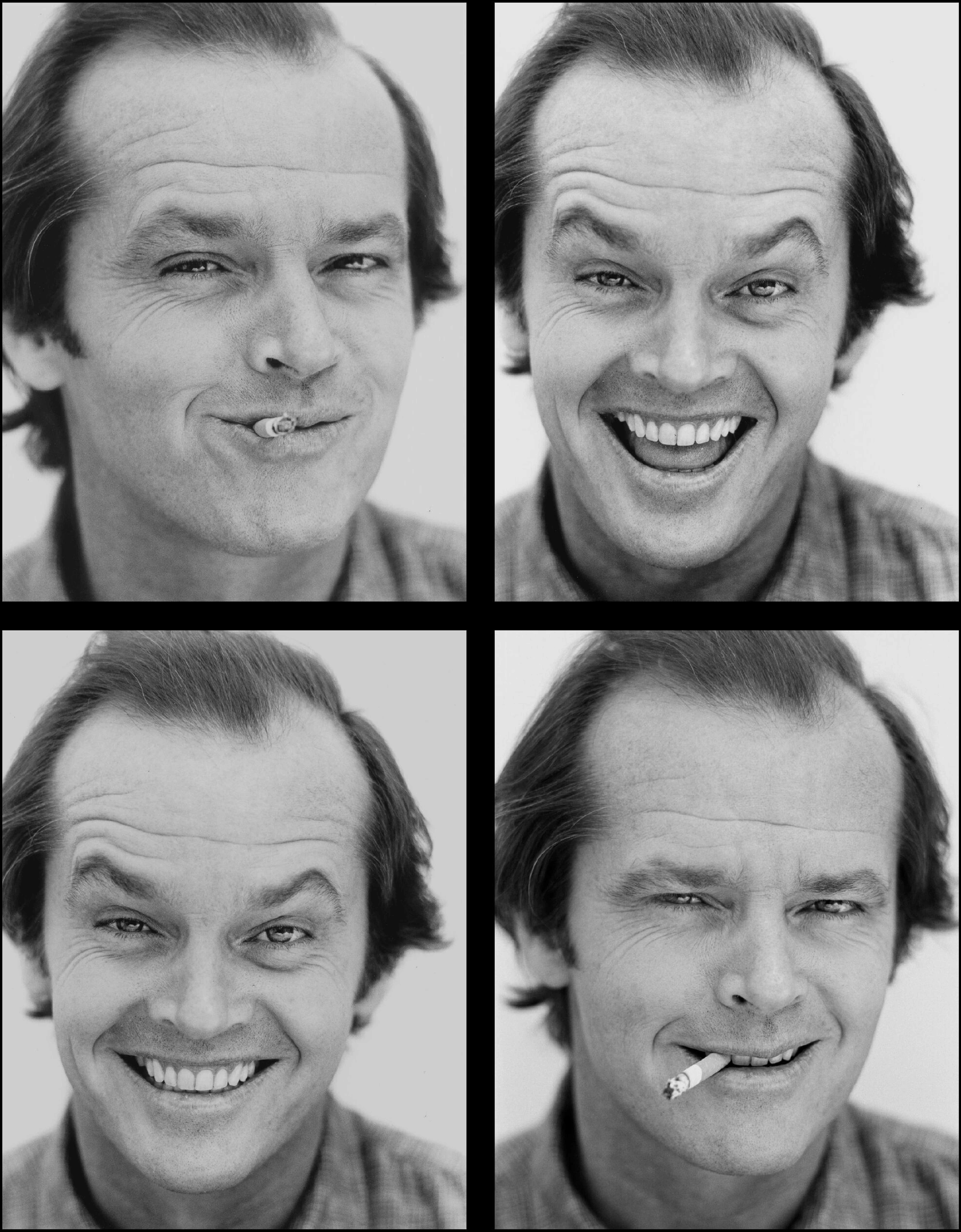
Pulling from scraps of paper across her studio, Sachi lists her current references: American whalers, the bed as stage for a posed body, the Waqwaq tree of Arabic and Persian folklore, the artist Alice Neel, stolen large precious gems, knee-high stockings, and Pieter Bruegel the Elder, the Renaissance painter.

She takes particular inspiration from the theme of metamorphosis, the process of shape-shifting that occurs throughout Greek mythology. In one story, for example, Daphne, a nymph, prays to the gods to be protected from pursuit by Apollo, who wishes to make her his bride. Wanting to remain a virgin forever, Daphne is saved when the gods answer her call and transform her into a laurel tree.

Each year, Sachi undergoes a metamorphosis of her own with the passing of the seasons. "Every fall and spring, I'll make tons of work and paint very freely, and then in the summer and in the winter, I'm battling something that's stopping me," she says. "In an ideal world, I would paint only in the fall and the spring, and in the winter, I would read and write, and in the summer, I would just swim."

But for every young artist, especially one trying to live and work and succeed in New York, these blocks are something to be pushed through. "I'll get very frustrated, and I'll have to just let myself be frustrated," Sachi says. "Once I get past that big frustration or anger that I'm having over not being able to make the painting or think of an idea I like behind the painting, then the inspiration will come really fast and it will launch me back into painting again. It's like a mood swing."

THE MEAT SUP ARKET



THIS PAGE: **JACK NICHOLSON** (1978). PHOTOGRAPHS BY **SNOWDON/TRUNK ARCHIVE**.

THE PLAYBOY BOOK OF WISDOM

EVERYTHING *you need* TO KNOW *about life*, *gathered* FROM FIVE DECADES *of* PLAYBOY *Interviews.* **BY WILL DANA**

A

ADDICTION

I was trying not to feel things, and that's ridiculous. It's one of the dumbest things you can do, because all you're doing is postponing the inevitable. Someday you'll have to look all those things in the eye rather than try to numb the pain.

—**JOHNNY DEPP**, *May 2004*

ADVICE

The only advice I can give is never to take advice from anybody.

—**ROBERT ALTMAN**, *August 1976*

THE AFTERLIFE

My mother is an orthodox paranoid, and while she doesn't believe in an afterlife, she doesn't believe in a present one, either.

—**WOODY ALLEN**, *May 1967*

Most people find it hard to believe in heaven but have no difficulty believing in hell, which is a fair commentary on the kind of lives we live.

—**ANTHONY BURGESS**, *September 1974*

AI

Eventually, we will have to share this planet with machines whose intelligence and abilities far surpass our own. But the interrelationship—if intelligently managed by man—could have an immeasurably enriching effect on society.

—**STANLEY KUBRICK**, *September 1968*

AMBITION

I felt far too insignificant as just another person. I couldn't exist thinking all that was important was to be a good person. I thought, "Fuck that." I don't want to be just another honest Joe. I want to be a super-superbeing and improve all the equipment that I've been given to where it works 300 percent better. I find that it's possible to do it.

—**DAVID BOWIE**, *September 1976*

I always had the feeling that I wanted to do everything yesterday. My whole life was like I was always on the run and nothing was enough. I always felt like I was a day short of what I wanted to know about life, about acting, about the world.

—**TOM CRUISE**, *January 1990*

I love being shackled with expectations.

—**QUENTIN TARANTINO**, *November 2003*

AMERICANS

The people of the United States are one of the peoples I most admire in the world. The only thing I don't understand is why a country that manages to do so many things so well cannot do better in choosing its Presidents.

—**GABRIEL GARCÍA MÁRQUEZ**, *February 1983*

ANXIETY

Comfort is no protection from anxiety.

—**MICHELANGELO ANTONIONI**, *November 1967*

Part of me suspects that I'm a loser and the other part of me thinks I'm God Almighty.

—**JOHN LENNON**, *January 1981*

If I'm not nervous, then there's something to be nervous about.

—**MARTIN SCORSESE**, *April 1991*

B

BEAUTY

Ninety percent of the girls who've taken off their clothes should've left them on, anyway; their figures just aren't good enough.

—**RAQUEL WELCH**, *January 1970*

I don't think many bodies are really very attractive when they're photographed. I'd rather keep my eyes shut.

—**ANSEL ADAMS**, *May 1983*

BISEXUALITY

It's true: I am a bisexual. It's the best thing that ever happened to me. Fun too.

—**DAVID BOWIE**, *September 1976*

BLINDNESS

Because I can't check things visually, I think my observations are sharper in other ways. With people, for instance, I say to hell with their physical selves. I concentrate on their inner looks. I can spot real people and phonies quicker than most folks. Let's say a cat with eyes gets together with a fine, sexy woman. Well, she's got half her battle won right there; he's so wiped out by the sight of her talents that he's in danger of giving up a week's paycheck before they even get into bed. Now, with me, she's got to show how good her talents work—plus have a good story—before I even twitch. If you work hard enough, you can turn almost anything to your advantage.

—**RAY CHARLES**, *March 1970*

RIGHT: **DAVID BOWIE** “It’s true: I am a bisexual,” the rocker told *Playboy* in September 1976. “It’s the best thing that ever happened to me. Fun too.”

PHOTOGRAPH BY **HELMUT NEWTON FOUNDATION/TRUNK ARCHIVE**

BOOKKEEPING

I fire my accountant every year. Every time I pay taxes, he’s fired. Uncle Sam did not go in that recording booth with me. He didn’t bang his head against the wall until he came up with the hook for “Hovi Baby.” It’s crazy, the checks that I send to the government, for nothing. And then my accountant says, “Be happy that you’re fortunate enough to cut this check.” “Oh yeah? Fuck you! You’re fucking fired!” That’s my response. Then I hire him back, because he’s right.

—**JAY-Z**, *April 2003*

BOOZE

I think most artistic Celts lead this sort of double life: the drunk one dangerous and irresponsible, the sober one too responsible and too retiring.

—**RICHARD BURTON**, *September 1963*

Booze may whet the desire, but it sure louses up the performance.

—**STEPHEN KING**, *June 1983*

BRAINS

The human brain is too high-powered to have many practical uses in this particular universe.

—**KURT VONNEGUT**, *July 1973*

BREAKFAST

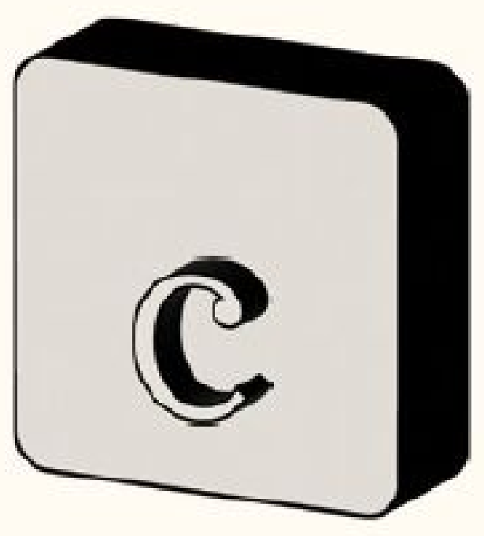
Learn how to cook a fucking omelet. You look good doing it, and it’s a nice thing to do for somebody you just had sex with. I think it’s good for the world. It’s a good thing all around.

—**ANTHONY BOURDAIN**, *November 2011*

BREASTS

There’s an unfortunate obsession in this country with the mammary glands. Don’t get me wrong, though. Nice knockers are great, but they’re only one component of total sexuality. They’re not the end-all. As a matter of fact, when all the machinery swings into high gear, they kind of get lost in the shuffle.

—**RAQUEL WELCH**, *January 1970*



CHANGE

There is, of course, a popular myth that people do change; but in real life, they don’t.

> “*It’s* TRUE: *I* AM *a* BISEXUAL.”
>
> **DAVID BOWIE**
> *On bisexuality / September 1976*

With age and experience, they simply become more adroit at selling themselves.

—**GORE VIDAL**, *June 1969*

Generally, people are afraid. They pretend they aren’t. It’s part of the denial. We’re all part of it. As much as we pretend otherwise, we want what’s comfortable, and we’re afraid of what’s different.

—**FRANK GEHRY**, *January 2011*

CHILDREN

I don’t like the child. I don’t like the dog, the cat, nothing small.

—**SALVADOR DALÍ**, *July 1964*

Every time you think that you might want to have kids, go to a restaurant and sit next to one. You just don’t want one.

—**STEVE MARTIN**, *January 1980*

That bit of love you gave your own parents, the bit you don’t remember—your kid gives that back to you. And you realize, “I’ve just been given the first two or three years of my life back.”

—**KEITH RICHARDS**, *October 1989*

COCAINE

Coke is a worthless drug. It has no edge. Dollar for dollar, it’s probably the most inefficient drug on the market. It’s not worth the effort or the risk or the money—at least not to me. It’s a social drug; it’s more important to offer it than it is to use it.

—**HUNTER S. THOMPSON**, *October 1974*

I like fast drugs. I hate downs and slow drugs like grass. I hate sleep. I would much prefer staying up, just working, all the time. It makes me so mad that we can’t do anything about sleep or the common cold.

—**DAVID BOWIE**, *September 1976*

I started doing coke to feel open, but by that time, the hole had opened so wide that I’d fallen through.

—**GEORGE CARLIN**, *January 1982*

COMPROMISE

I used to think that the worst thing a man could do was make compromises. But of course we have to. We couldn’t live otherwise. But for a long time I thought I could be above it all. I have learned that I can’t. I have learned that what matters, really, is being alive.

—**INGMAR BERGMAN**, *June 1964*

CONFIDENCE

I’ve got more confidence than I do talent, I think. I think confidence is the main achiever of success, I really do. Just believin’ you can do it. You can imagine it to the point where it can become reality.

—**DOLLY PARTON**, *October 1978*

Always show less than you have.

—**MARLON BRANDO**, *January 1979*

Confidence is a fascinating commodity. There’s no upper limit on the usefulness of it, as long as it doesn’t bleed into arrogance. You need as much of it as you can get.

—**JERRY SEINFELD**, *October 1993*

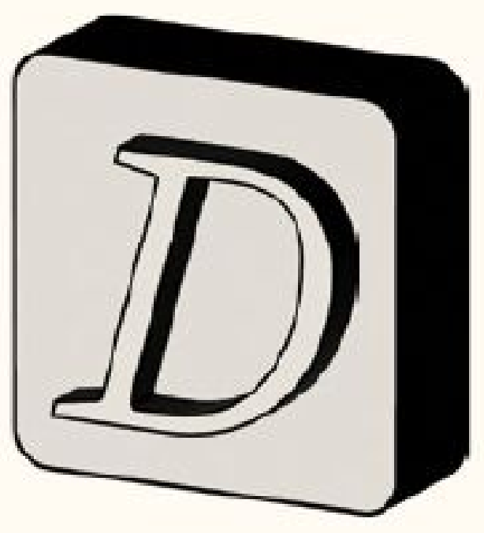
CRITICISM

Some actors say they’re above criticism. They say they don’t read it. I don’t believe them.

—**PETER SELLERS**, *October 1962*

I’m always a little afraid of rereading my own work, for fear I’ll discover that my harsher critics are correct.

—**TRUMAN CAPOTE**, *March 1968*



DEATH

I don’t think I shall survive after death, and I can’t hold out too much hope for other people either.

—**RICHARD BURTON**, *September 1963*

Death is like a legendary continent, a faraway land that you’ve heard spoken about in contradictory terms. Some say it exists; others that it doesn't. Some say it's most beautiful; others that it's horrible. Some say it's better than this world, while others claim that nothing is as beautiful as life, that death is only silence and a forgetting. But let's face it: There is this country, and sooner or later we're all going there.

—**FEDERICO FELLINI**, *February 1966*

I've come to look upon death the same way I look upon root canal work. Everyone else seems to get through it all right, so it couldn't be too difficult for me.

—**JOSEPH HELLER**, *June 1975*

DEMONS

If I got rid of my demons, I'd lose my angels.

—**TENNESSEE WILLIAMS**, *April 1973*

If there are things floating around out there—disembodied entities, spirit demons, call them what you will—then it's the height of folly to invite them to use you as a channel into this world. Because they might like what they found, man, and they might decide to stay.

—**STEPHEN KING**, *June 1983*

DESPAIR

I don't knock despair. First of all, it's very classy. Secondly, it looks like we're in for a craze of despair just as soon as we finish the current craze for nostalgia. One can already see the signs: intellectuals in despair, parents in despair, hard hats in despair. But all of it is a peculiarly American kind of despair. Despair with a kind of lilt to it. It's the kind of despair that doesn't stop you from having a terrific time on weekends. You can survive pretty good with despair—which is more than I can say for our recent versions of hope.

—**JULES FEIFFER**, *September 1971*

THE DEVIL

When I talk about the devil these days, I don't really know whether I'm talking about a corrupter of the soul or a deadening influence. I don't know who or where the enemy is. That's despair, son.

—**NORMAN MAILER**, *January 1968*

The devil is everything false. The devil will go as deep as you let the devil go. If you understand what that whole scene is about, you can easily step aside. But if you want the confrontation to begin with, well, there's plenty of it. But then again, if you believe you have a purpose and a mission, and not much time to carry it out, you don't bother about those things.

—**BOB DYLAN**, *March 1978*

DISCIPLINE

I'm just a very disciplined person. If I feel myself getting too close to something, I know

I've got to cut it off. If I feel myself getting real sad about something, I avoid that too. I don't think it's unhealthy to experience the real highs and the real lows; I just think one should travel at a safe speed.

—**EDDIE MURPHY**, *February 1990*

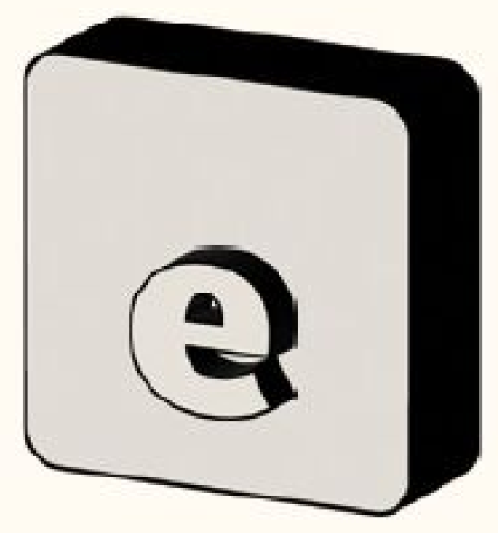
DIVORCE

If there is any realistic deterrent to marriage, it's the fact that you can't afford divorce.

—**JACK NICHOLSON**, *April 1972*

I was married too many times to have much money.

—**SAUL BELLOW**, *May 1997*



EDUCATION

There's a time and place for everything, and it's called college.

—**TREY PARKER**, *June 2000*

EGO

I think it's bullshit when people say that ego is a bad trip. It's the only trip. You are who you are because of your ego, and without it, nothing counts. My sense of self makes me competitive, not with guys who are less talented than me but with people who are my equals or better. That's the kick for me.

—**JOHN CASSAVETES**, *July 1971*

ENEMIES

People don't want to lose their enemies. We have favorite enemies, people we love to hate and we hate to love. If they do something good, we don't like it. I found myself doing that with Ronald Reagan. He is anathema to me. If he does something that's reasonable, I find my mind trying to find some way to interpret it so that it's not reasonable, so that somewhere it's jingoist extremism.

—**MARLON BRANDO**, *January 1979*

EXES

My exes always seem to land on their feet. They always trade up. I should probably use that as a pickup line: "Look, it's not going to last very long with me, but the next guy you end up with will be great!"

—**OWEN WILSON**, *July 2005*

EXPERIENCE

Experience itself, whatever it be—brutal, sorrowful, or whatever—is the only teacher. We don't need priests and we don't need analysts; we don't need mental crutches of any sort. They want us to accept things as they are. But things as they are, are wrong.

—**HENRY MILLER**, *September 1964*

Go to all the places you're uncomfortable in and prove yourself, because someday you're going to have to prove yourself. Do it while you're young and you'll never regret it. Take the word of a college dropout.

—**JOHN CASSAVETES**, *July 1971*

EXTORTION

There have been times when I paid sums of money not to deal with something, one extortion or another, and not because the other person was in the right. Through these experiences I have learned something that is the opposite of what I would have thought: that ill-gotten gains are never good for the person receiving them. So when you're paying an extortionist, there's a bit of diabolical delight and contempt in handing over that check. It's like when you get robbed. You would think I'd be furious, but pretty soon I always feel bad for the person who has to lead that kind of life.

—**JACK NICHOLSON**, *January 2004*

FAILURE

Along with success come drugs, divorce, fornication, bullying, travel, meditation, medication, depression, neurosis, and suicide. With failure comes failure.

—**JOSEPH HELLER**, *June 1975*

You fail only when you let death creep in and take over a part of your life that should be alive.

—**BOB DYLAN**, *March 1978*

I'd rather divorce myself from the world than face the heartbreak of partial success. Because partial success implies overwhelming failure.

—**GEORGE CARLIN**, *January 1982*

FELLATIO

Good fellatio is an art form. I know this from gay men. One of them said that they should have federal funding for the development of fellatio skills—it should be underwritten.

—**CAMILLE PAGLIA**, *May 1995*

FIDELITY

Sometimes, the idea of an anonymous fuck is sort of appealing. You know, some gal comes up to you at an autograph signing and says, "Let's go to my place," and you're leaving town the next morning and part of you is tempted to say, "Yeah, let's; we'll pour Wesson oil over each other and really screw our eyes out." But it's better not to start down that slippery slope—no reference to the Wesson oil intended—and I haven't. My marriage is too important to me, and anyway, so much of my energy goes into writing that I don't really need to fool around.

—**STEPHEN KING**, *June 1983*

FRIENDSHIP

A friend, to me, is one of the blessings in life. And I don't agree with that saying "You can count your real friends on one hand." If that's so, then you ain't farming the right acres, because friends are everywhere.

—**KEITH RICHARDS**, *October 1989*

FUN

PLAYBOY: *How do you get your kicks these days?*

BOB DYLAN: I hire people to look into my eyes, and then I have them kick me.

PLAYBOY: *And that's the way you get your kicks?*

BOB DYLAN: No. Then I forgive them; that's where my kicks come in.

—**BOB DYLAN**, *March 1966*

GOD

I don't care if there's a god or not.

—**JOSEPH HELLER**, *June 1975*

I don't particularly think that God wants me thinking about Him all the time. I think that would be a tremendous burden on Him, you know. He's got enough people asking Him for favors. He's got enough people asking Him to pull strings. I'll pull my own strings, you know.

—**BOB DYLAN**, *March 1978*

THE GRIND

The minute you know you're on safe ground, you're dead. You're finished. It's over. The last thing I want is to be established. I want to go to bed every night saying, "If I never wake again, I certainly will have lived while I was alive."

—**DAVID BOWIE**, *September 1976*

There's very little levity under the basket. That's where most people end up bleeding.

—**KAREEM ABDUL-JABBAR**, *June 1986*

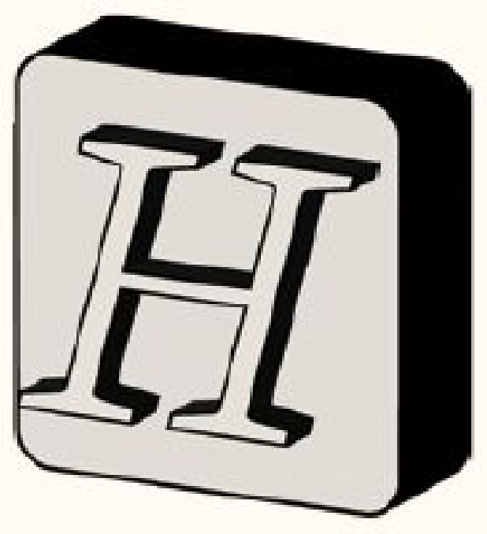
GROWTH

Growth is not simply going forward; it's going forward until you have to make a delicate decision either to continue in a difficult situation or to retreat and look for another way to go forward.

—**NORMAN MAILER**, *January 1968*

I am not afraid of the words *crisis* and *tension*. I deeply oppose violence, but constructive crisis and tension are necessary for growth. Innate in all life, and all growth, is tension.

—**MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.**, *January 1965*



HAPPINESS

Happiness is simply a temporary condition that precedes unhappiness. Fortunately for us, it works the other way around as well. But it's all a part of the carnival, isn't it?

—**FEDERICO FELLINI**, *February 1966*

HEROES

I don't appreciate worship of dead Sid Vicious or of dead James Dean or of dead John Wayne. It's the same thing. Making Sid Vicious a hero, Jim Morrison—it's garbage to me. I worship the people who survive.

—**JOHN LENNON**, *January 1981*

HOLLYWOOD

This isn't a game. There's too much at stake. And the woods are full of killers, all sizes, all colors. A director has to deal with a whole world absolutely teeming with mediocrities, jackals, hangers-on, and just plain killers. The attrition is terrific. It can kill you.

—**SAM PECKINPAH**, *August 1972*

Making movies is a great, complex, writhing crap game.

—**FRANCIS FORD COPPOLA**, *July 1975*

HOPE

It can be argued that man's spiritually incurable. Well, maybe that's true, but there have been enough emancipated individuals throughout the course of history—prophets, religious leaders, innovators—to make me believe that we can break the old, suffocating molds and jump clear of the clockwork, as someone put it. If we can, it's just barely possible that someday what's buried in us and longs to come out will find expression.

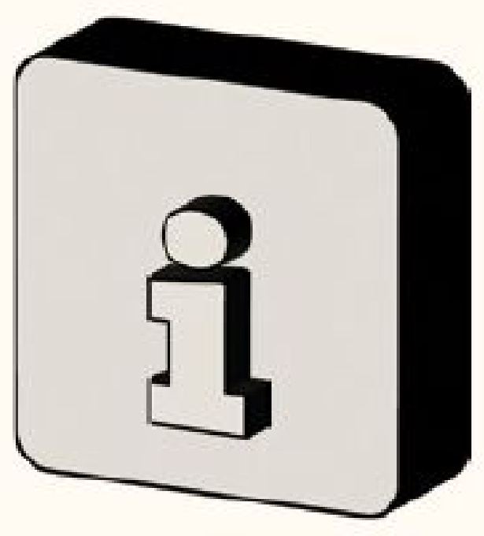
—**HENRY MILLER**, *September 1964*

Because I have now broken free from the illusions of youth, I believe I've become an optimist.

—**JEAN-PAUL SARTRE**, *May 1965*

I'm not too gloomy about the future, because I think man is so ingenious that he will find solutions to his problems. We may even have a pretty good time.

—**ANTHONY BURGESS**, *September 1974*



IDEALISM

A certain amount of idealism in everybody's life is not a bad thing. But it ought to be tough-minded idealism, idealism that knows how many points there are on the compass and that institutions have very big walls, and if you ram your head against those walls, you're going to bounce back a few times. That kind of idealism is a very healthy thing. What are we without our idealism, our belief that there's a possibility of a better world and a better life?

—**DAVID HALBERSTAM**, *August 1973*

INSPIRATION

The only art I'll ever study is stuff that I can steal from. Mick Jagger is scared to walk into the same room as me even thinking any new idea. He knows I'll snatch it.

—**DAVID BOWIE**, *September 1976*

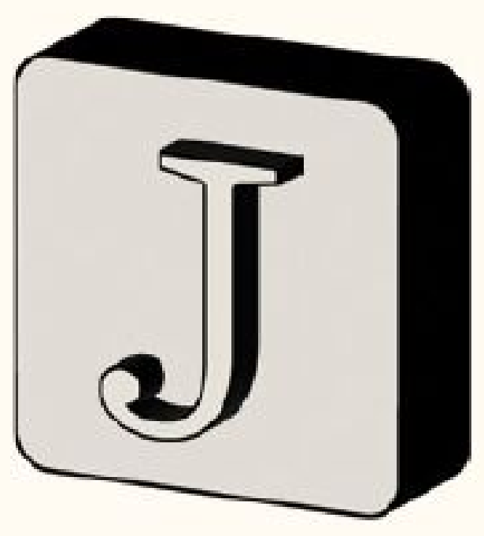
I'd rather miss and be sentimental than cover up my heart.

—**PAUL SIMON**, *February 1984*

INTEGRITY

There's always that whispering voice in your head that you don't always want to listen to. However, it's pretty much a source of your integrity and truth. I'd like to hear it as well as possible.

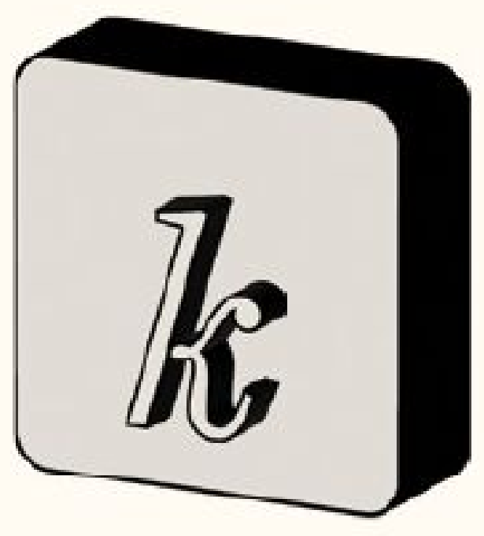
—**JACK NICHOLSON**, *January 2004*



JAMES BOND

James Bond is a healthy, violent, noncerebral man in his middle 30s and a creature of his era. I don't think that he is necessarily a good guy or a bad guy. He's got his vices and very few perceptible virtues except patriotism and courage, which are probably not virtues anyway. What politics he has are just a little bit left of center. He's got little culture. When he reads anything, he reads books on golf, and so on. I didn't intend for him to be a particularly likable person. He's a cipher, a blunt instrument in the hands of government.

—**IAN FLEMING**, *December 1964*



THE KENNEDYS

Kennedy was a fine man, maybe even a

> ”
>
> *Always* SHOW *less* THAN *you* HAVE.
>
> “

MARLON BRANDO

On confidence / January 1979

LEFT: **TOM CRUISE** "This kid has the head and the balls to be one of the great ones," Paul Newman told *Playboy* in January 1990.
PHOTOGRAPH BY **HERB RITTS/TRUNK ARCHIVE**

> "I ALWAYS *had the* FEELING *that I wanted to do* EVERYTHING YESTERDAY. *My whole* LIFE *was like I was* ALWAYS *on* THE RUN *and nothing was* ENOUGH."

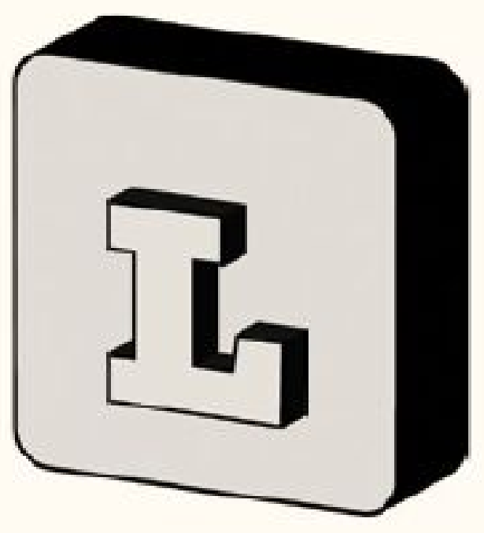
TOM CRUISE
On ambition / January 1990

magical man, and he changed the style of America; he opened it up. Something racy came back into American life. The country was saltier; it swung more.
—**NORMAN MAILER**, *January 1968*

I didn't like Bobby, but I did like Jack.... He had a fine, dry kind of humor, not very American, coupled with a sort of preppish toughness that was engaging.... He was a cheerful snob who took a delight in having married into what he regarded as the American old guard—another badge for the Kennedys, those very big foxes who have done their share of spoiling in the vineyard.
—**GORE VIDAL**, *June 1969*

What the Kennedys finally accomplished, I think, was precious little. I think there was in a sense of a beginning, of a kind of new candor and a new honesty in government. All that was wiped out by the lies about Vietnam.
—**DAVID HALBERSTAM**, *August 1973*

The Kennedy administration was like a bunch of spoiled fraternity brats celebrating after having bought a campus election.
—**JOSEPH HELLER**, *June 1975*



LAWYERS
Lawyers are the sanitary engineers of society. A necessary evil.
—**ARTHUR C. CLARKE**, *July 1986*

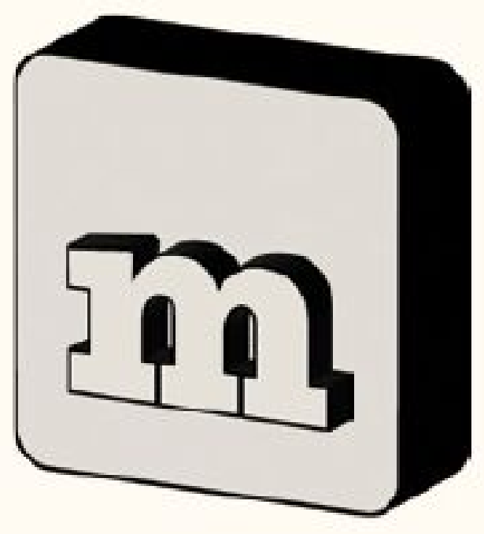
LOVE
All I know about love is: Don't fuck with it.
—**SAM PECKINPAH**, *August 1972*

PLAYBOY: *Do you believe that, in the final analysis, a man follows his phallus?*

TENNESSEE WILLIAMS: I hope not, baby. I hope he follows his heart, his frightened heart.
—**TENNESSEE WILLIAMS**, *April 1973*

I was in love once, maybe, and it was an awful experience. It rotted me, drained me, and it was a disease. Hateful thing, it was. Being in love is something that breeds brute anger and jealousy. Everything but love, it seems. It's a bit like Christianity—or any religion, for that matter.
—**DAVID BOWIE**, *September 1976*

LUST
I try not to commit a deliberate sin. I recognize that I'm going to do it anyhow, because I'm human and I'm tempted. And Christ set some almost impossible standards for us. Christ said, "I tell you that anyone who looks on a woman with lust has in his heart already committed adultery." I've looked on a lot of women with lust. I've committed adultery in my heart many times. This is something that God recognizes I will do—and I have done it—and God forgives me for it.
—**JIMMY CARTER**, *November 1976*



MANHOOD
If you want to survive, you have to show your ass. You have to humiliate and embarrass yourself. You can't just walk in and play it safe.
—**PAUL NEWMAN**, *July 1968*

People will try you. They'll try anybody. They start by saying something funny, something sarcastic, to see how far they can go. But you nip it in the bud. You don't let anyone get away with saying anything funny or sarcastic. You have to demonstrate who you are right on the spot. That's what I do. That's who I am. I'm a settler. I'm in my glory in a place like that. Chaos all over.
—**MIKE TYSON**, *November 1998*

MARRIAGE
If you live with another person, you're going to have to deal with that person, and most of us want to be dealt with rather than deal with. We want to be served without being forced to recognize the existence of the servant, and certainly without dealing with the servant as an entity. What gets everybody into trouble is that two people come together, each thinking the other is the servant, and they find they've been had. And so it comes to the point where you say, "My God, there's another person in my bed! And she's here under false pretenses."
—**JULES FEIFFER**, *September 1971*

Marriage is such a hassle; it's just a label to wear so that people can figure out how to relate to you. It has nothing to do with the real relationship between two people.
—**CHER**, *October 1975*

THE MEDIA
This is a national tragedy, of course—that we've changed from a society to an audience.
—**KURT VONNEGUT**, *July 1973*

I have a feeling sometimes that 90 percent of American journalists spend their time covering 10 percent of the reality—and 90 percent of the reality goes uncovered.
—**DAVID HALBERSTAM**, *August 1973*

The traveling press have zero interest in any issue unless it's a matter of making a mistake. What they're looking for is a 47-second argument between me and another candidate or something like that. There's nobody in the back of this plane who would ask an

issue question unless he thought he could trick me into some crazy statement.
—**JIMMY CARTER**, *November 1976*

MEN

Yoko looks upon men as assistants.... Of varying degrees of intimacy, but basically assistants.
—**JOHN LENNON**, *January 1981*

Every time a man approaches a woman, he is overcome with anxiety because he is approaching the place where he was born.
—**CAMILLE PAGLIA**, *May 1995*

THE MOB

America was absolutely ripe for the Mafia. Everything the Mafia believed in and was set up to handle—absolute control, the carving out of territories, the rigging of prices, and the elimination of competition—everything was here.
—**FRANCIS FORD COPPOLA**, *July 1975*

MONEY

Having too much of anything worries me—especially money. It makes me uncomfortable.
—**HENRY MILLER**, *September 1964*

Great money is the most opaque of screens.
—**GORE VIDAL**, *June 1969*

When you're dealing in millions, you're dealing with people at their meanest.
—**SAM PECKINPAH**, *August 1972*

I used to think being rich meant having a lot of money. Now I think it means having a lot of money.
—**GROUCHO MARX**, *September 1974*

Any business will eventually degenerate into a con game.
—**DAVID MAMET**, *April 1995*

I'm learning that the big cats don't talk about money, only us ignorant rappers. I have to get sophisticated with my paper. I'm not nouveau money.
—**JAY-Z**, *April 2003*

One of the oldest principles is that if you want to be successful, be sure your partners make money. Mine do. That's why they call people like me "the money." I've always been uncomfortable with it, but it's the way it is. "Where's the money?" I am the money. As the money, you had better understand what the money is.
—**JACK NICHOLSON**, *January 2004*

MOTIVATION

When my brothers and I first had some success with movies, my dad got really charged up. Some of it was pride and excitement, but a lot of it was imagining how this must sting all the people who had bet against us. In my dad's mind there were a lot of them—people for whom our success was a stake in the heart. The headmaster who expelled me, for example, would've been a charter member of the stake-in-the-heart club. I don't know how spiritually sound that kind of approach to life is, but sometimes you need little things to get you charged up.
—**OWEN WILSON**, *July 2005*

O

ORGASM

The anal-sphincter-prostate orgasm some men are capable of having is a great opening of feeling and delight and an extraordinarily beautiful experience, and rare. I don't know whether it's anything that needs to be recommended universally, but I do feel that whenever it happens, it should be honored rather than despised, just as mountain climbing and courage in the boxing ring are honored—or any extension of natural faculties to experience high, luminous extremes of awareness of nature.
—**ALLEN GINSBERG**, *April 1969*

> ”
> TOUGH *is for* PEOPLE
> *without* MONEY.
> “
>
> **TA-NEHISI COATES**
> *On poverty / July/August 2016*

P

THE PAST

Don't take it all too seriously. If you want to live your life in a creative way, as an artist, you have to not look back too much. You have to be willing to take whatever you've done and whoever you were and throw them away.
—**STEVE JOBS**, *February 1985*

PLEASURE

All the good stuff happens after midnight, let's face it—even as a kid. Ice cream certainly tastes better after midnight.
—**MATT GROENING**, *June 2007*

POLITICS

The sad paradox of liberalism is to want majority rule while realizing that the majority is instinctively illiberal.
—**GORE VIDAL**, *June 1969*

In Washington, the truth is never told in daylight hours or across a desk.
—**HUNTER S. THOMPSON**, *October 1974*

We're led to believe we're free through the exercise of ineffective freedoms.
—**GEORGE CARLIN**, *January 1982*

It is an illusion that if you're right-wing, you are going to be more secure—that is, unless you've got an awful lot of money under your right wing.
—**ANSEL ADAMS**, *May 1983*

POVERTY

I grew up thinking I wanted to be a movie star, because they were happy; they wore diamonds. That life would take me away from all that was real and ugly. I always felt really embarrassed about being poor, because I thought it was punishment for something I had done wrong.
—**CHER**, *October 1975*

Tough is for people without money.
—**TA-NEHISI COATES**, *July/August 2016*

PRAYER

Well, yes. If something happens to me that is a little disconcerting, if I feel a trepidation, if a thought comes into my head of animosity or hatred toward someone, then I just kind of say a brief silent prayer. I don't ask for myself but just to let me understand what another's feelings might be. It's not something that's

conscious or formal. It's just a part of my life.
—**JIMMY CARTER**, *November 1976*

PREMATURE EJACULATION

When I began sexual activity in earnest, my point of view was simply to try to seduce everyone I could. At that time, I had trouble with ejaculatio praecox—you poke her eight times and right away you're coming. A premature ejaculation is really a form of impotence. The root of it all was in some kind of pleasure denial. Somehow, in the sexual experience, I was making the woman into a sort of mom—an authoritarian female figure. That made me feel inadequate to the situation, small and childish. I solved none of these problems in therapy; I worked them out for myself. But any of them might reappear.
—**JACK NICHOLSON**, *April 1972*

THE PRIESTHOOD

I couldn't become a priest because I couldn't resolve how one could take the concepts of Christianity and make them apply to daily life. You hear how life's supposed to work from priests, then you watch how it really works on the streets.
—**MARTIN SCORSESE**, *April 1991*

PSYCHEDELICS

If you haven't paid the real wages of love or courage or abstention or discipline or sacrifice or wit in the eye of danger, then taking a psychedelic drug is living the life of a parasite; it's drawing on sweets you have not earned.
—**NORMAN MAILER**, *January 1968*

There's only one king drug, when you get down to it, and that's acid. About twice a year you should blow your fucking tubes out with a tremendous hit of really good acid. Take 72 hours and just go completely amok, break it all down.... Before [LSD], I had this dark fear that if I lost control, all these horrible psychic worms and rats would come out. But I went to the bottom of the well and found out there's nothing down there I have to worry about, no secret ugly things waiting for a chance to erupt.
—**HUNTER S. THOMPSON**, *October 1974*

Acid only gives people a link with their own imagery. I already had it. It was nothing new to me. It just sort of made a lot of fancy colors. Flashy lights and things. "Oh, look. I see God in the window." So what?
—**DAVID BOWIE**, *September 1976*

We must always remember to thank the CIA and the army for LSD.... They invented LSD to control people, and what they did was give us freedom.
—**JOHN LENNON**, *January 1981*

Acid is just a chemical illusion, a game you play with your brain. It's totally meaningless in terms of a genuine expansion of consciousness. So I've never bought the argument that hallucinogens open the doors to perception. That's mystical self-indulgence, the kind of bullshit Timothy Leary used to preach.
—**STEPHEN KING**, *June 1983*

PSYCHOANALYSIS

Freudism and all it has tainted with its grotesque implications and methods appear to me to be one of the vilest deceits practiced by people on themselves and on others. I reject it utterly, along with a few other medieval items still adored by the ignorant, the conventional, or the very sick.
—**VLADIMIR NABOKOV**, *January 1964*

It's a sign that people are unable to shed their childhood. It's a way of remaining childish, of explaining your own defects, that you were unjustly punished or abused as a child. I've never found it to be much more than a racket.
—**SAUL BELLOW**, *May 1997*

RACE

When they can't fight you, they abandon the whole thought of any sort of empirical, historical, evidence-based argument, and they say, "Well, I don't like where you're coming from."
—**TA-NEHISI COATES**, *July/August 2016*

A song ain't why people kill cops. People were saying "fuck the police" before the song came out.
—**SNOOP DOGG**, *October 1995*

You can hardly meet a white person, especially a white man, that don't think he's qualified to tell you all about Negroes. I don't know how many times different whites have started talking, telling me they was raised up with a Negro boy. But I ain't found one yet that knows whatever happened to that boy after they grew up.
—**MILES DAVIS**, *September 1962*

You talk about the progress of the Negro—I'll tell you, mister, it's just because the Negro has been in America while America has gone forward that the Negro appears to have gone forward. The Negro is like a man on a luxury commuter train doing 90 miles an hour. He looks out of the window, along with all the white passengers in their Pullman chairs, and he thinks he's doing 90 too. Then he gets to the men's room and looks in the mirror—and he sees he's not really getting anywhere at all. His reflection shows a Black man standing there in the white uniform of a dining car steward. He may get on the 5:10, all right, but he sure won't be getting off at Westport.
—**MALCOLM X**, *May 1963*

The most pervasive mistake I have made was in believing that because our cause was just, we could be sure that the white ministers of the South would rise to our aid.... I ended up, of course, chastened and disillusioned. As our movement unfolded and direct appeals were made to white ministers, most folded their hands—and some even took stands against us.
—**MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.**, *January 1965*

RAGE

I was a hitter. I couldn't express myself and I hit. I fought men and I hit women. That is why I am always on about peace, you see. It is the most violent people who go for love and peace. Everything's the opposite. But I sincerely believe in love and peace. I am a violent man who has learned not to be violent and regrets his violence. I will have to be a lot older before I can face in public how I treated women as a youngster.
—**JOHN LENNON**, *January 1981*

I just hate everything and everybody. And that's why I'm so funny. If I didn't have all these sensitivities, I'd have nothing to talk about.
—**JERRY SEINFELD**, *October 1993*

RATIONAL THOUGHT

When I came back from India, I found myself asking, "What was the one most important thing that had struck me?" And I think it was that Western rational thought is not an innate human characteristic. It is a learned ability. It had never occurred to me that if no one taught us how to think this way, we would not think this way.
—**STEVE JOBS**, *February 1985*

RESENTMENT

If one wants to gain even a slight understanding of the world, one has to get rid of resentment. I still feel some resentment toward society, but less and less, and I hope that before long, it'll all be gone. At bottom, I don't give a damn. You—that is, society—no longer interest me as an enemy.
—**JEAN GENET**, *April 1964*

RESPONSIBILITY

The minute you have the means to take responsibility for your own dreams and can be held accountable for whether they come

RIGHT: **JOHN LENNON AND YOKO ONO** Photographed in December 1980, just days before he was assassinated. A few weeks earlier, he'd given *Playboy* one of the most honest and wide-ranging interviews of his career. It was published in the January 1981 issue, appearing on newsstands just days after his killing.

PHOTOGRAPH BY **BOB GRUEN/TRUNK ARCHIVE**

> “*Don’t* EXPECT *me to be on* THE BARRICADES *unless it is with* FLOWERS.”
>
> **JOHN LENNON**
>
> *On revolution / January 1981*

true or not, life is a lot tougher. It's easy to have wonderful thoughts when the chance to implement them is remote. When you've gotten to a place where you at least have a chance of implementing your ideas, there's a lot more responsibility in that.

—**STEVE JOBS**, *February 1985*

REVOLUTION

I am convinced that unless the nonviolent philosophy had emerged and taken hold among Negroes, North and South, by today the streets of dozens of American communities would have flowed with blood.

—**MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.**, *January 1965*

Don't expect me to be on the barricades unless it is with flowers.

—**JOHN LENNON**, *January 1981*

RIVALRY

A creative writer must study carefully the works of his rivals, including the Almighty.

—**VLADIMIR NABOKOV**, *January 1964*

S

SACRIFICE

I feel that my cause is so right, so moral, that if I should lose my life, in some way it would aid the cause.

—**MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.**, *January 1965*

SALVATION

Without deprivation and struggle, there is no salvation and I am just a sword cutting daisies.

—**TENNESSEE WILLIAMS**, *April 1973*

THE SECRET LIFE

When you hide what you do, you always do it ineptly.

—**JEAN GENET**, *April 1964*

Everybody is an actor; you spend your whole day acting. You're hiding what you're thinking, what you're feeling.... And you pretend that everything's all right. That's acting.

—**MARLON BRANDO**, *January 1979*

Everyone has a totally secret and personal part of his personality that is never communicated or revealed.

—**GABRIEL GARCÍA MÁRQUEZ**, *February 1983*

SELF-DOUBT

What produces the self-doubt is boredom and idleness, when you're alone, when you're with your thoughts. In the midst of action, I never have self-doubt.

—**MIKE TYSON**, *November 1998*

SEX

Sex as an institution, sex as a general notion, sex as a problem, sex as a platitude—all this is something I find too tedious for words. Let us skip sex.

—**VLADIMIR NABOKOV**, *January 1964*

I think sex is dirty. I like it dirty. And the thing that makes it dirty is to grab something clean and defile it!

—**JOHN CASSAVETES**, *July 1971*

When I was 14, sex suddenly became all-important to me. It didn't really matter who or what it was with, as long as it was a sexual experience. So it was some very pretty boy in some school or other that I took home and neatly fucked on my bed upstairs. And that was it. My first thought was “Well, If I ever get sent to prison, I'll know how to keep happy.”

—**DAVID BOWIE**, *September 1976*

SEXISM

Women are taught to be powerful by being coquettish. They are taught to manipulate with their femininity. Instead of saying, “I'm a good plumber” or “I'm smart” or “I'm a good teacher” or “I'm a good homemaker” or “I'm a great athlete,” women are taught to use these weird stereotypical female things to get what they want.

—**SHARON STONE**, *December 1992*

SEXUAL IDENTITY

My poems get misinterpreted as promotion of homosexuality. Actually, it's more like promotion of frankness, about any subject.

—**ALLEN GINSBERG**, *April 1969*

I do think that if we survive long enough to evolve into a rational society, there will be a trend toward bisexuality. For one thing, bisexuality is, quite simply, more interesting than monosexuality.

—**GORE VIDAL**, *June 1969*

Confused people wrapped up in their safe skin of so-called normalcy assume that everyone who isn't “normal” is screwed up and inferior.

—**BOY GEORGE**, *May 1985*

SIN

If I knew what the original sin was, I would do it and let you know.

—**KEITH RICHARDS**, *October 1989*

SMARTS

Motherfucker don't need a gun. He needs his smarts.

—**SNOOP DOGG**, *October 1995*

SONGWRITING

I find G major to be the key of strength but also the key of regret. E major is the key of confidence. A-flat major is the key of renunciation.

—**BOB DYLAN**, *March 1978*

SPEEDING TICKETS

Act incredibly cheerful and upbeat. And don't admit to speeding—tell the cop you deserve the ticket and then add, “But if I could say one thing in my defense, and this isn't an excuse, because I know you got me dead to rights....” From there start talking a mile a minute about something crazy—why you're in a rush and how you forgot something for your girlfriend and she's going to kill you or whatever. It doesn't even have to make sense. You just want to connect. You don't say it, but the subtext is "Look at us out here on the road—it's all just a game, and we're both playing our parts because we've got no choice, but there's something kind of great about it...." And at the first sign of the cop cracking a smile, you smile, and pretty soon you're both kind of shrugging, like "Look how crazy life is!" And then—this is important—you don't ask to be let off; you say, "Wouldn't it be great if you let me off with a warning? How great would that be? Then we could both go our own way, and I've learned something and maybe you have too. And we just chalk it up to lessons learned."

—**OWEN WILSON**, *July 2005*

STRUGGLE

You don't have to starve to be a good artist. You just have to have love, insight, and a strong point of view. And you have to fight off depravity.

—**BOB DYLAN**, *March 1978*

STUPIDITY

People aren't very bright, you know. They say they want freedom, but when they get the chance, they pass up Nietzsche and choose Hitler.

—**DAVID BOWIE**, *September 1976*

SUFFERING

Unless you suffer, it's no good. Anything that comes easily is unworthy of you. Great work must be done with pain. There are athletes who learn to play with pain. I write with pain.

—**GAY TALESE**, *May 1980*

SURVIVAL

I come from very tough stock, and things that would kill other people don't kill me.

—**KEITH RICHARDS**, *October 1989*

t

TALENT

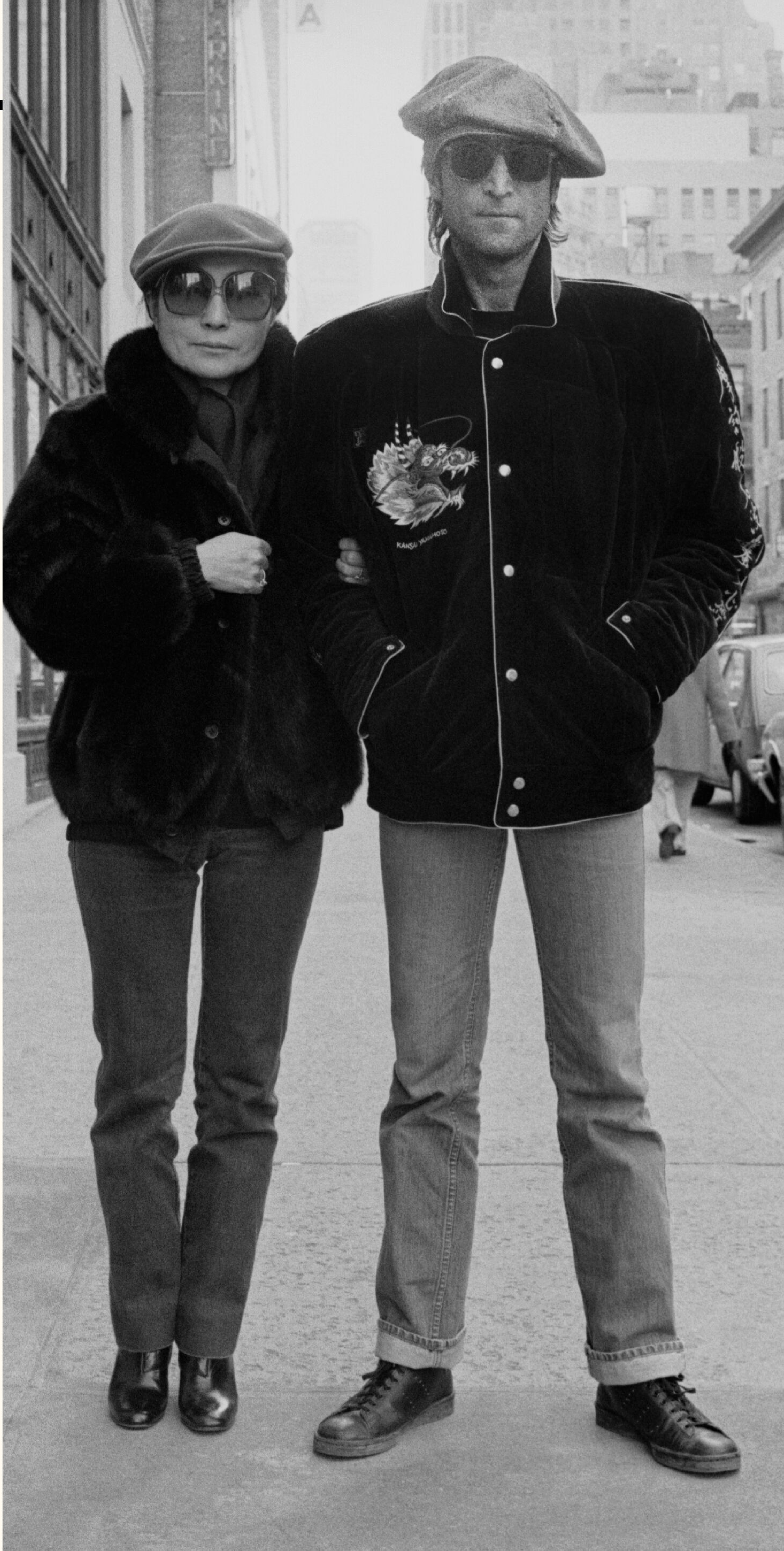
You can be the most artistically perfect performer in the world, but an audience is like a broad—if you're indifferent, endsville.

—**FRANK SINATRA**, *February 1963*

I can stand on my eye. I can sneeze backward. I can touch both ears together. I am able to lift large quantities of decayed matter. I both lie and make love pathologically.

—**WOODY ALLEN**, *May 1967*

You'll never go to any acting school in the world where people stand around trying to



LEFT: **SNOOP DOGG** At the time of his *Playboy* interview, in October 1995, he was facing murder charges of which he would be acquitted the following year.
PHOTOGRAPH BY **PETER HAPAK/TRUNK ARCHIVE**

be the lone, enigmatic stranger.... But at the same time, a lot of actors who play Henry V can't play my characters.
—**CLINT EASTWOOD**, *February 1974*

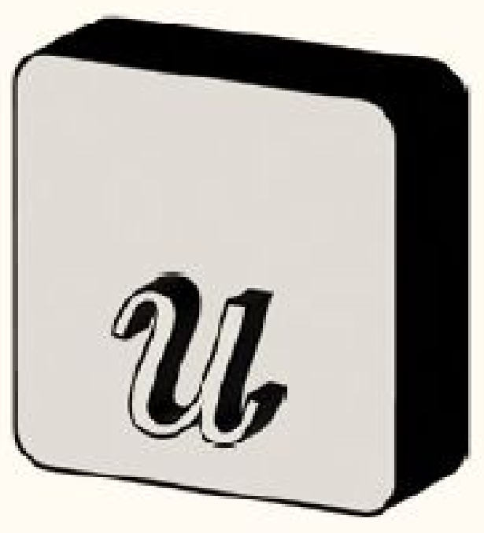
It's hard going for that front man gig like Mick does. It's hard being out front. You gotta be able to make it work; you gotta be able to actually believe you're semidivine when you're out there, then come off stage and know that you ain't.
—**KEITH RICHARDS**, *October 1989*

TECHNOLOGY

We live in a society that in many respects is a gigantic cheerleader for science and technology.... None of these advances have been as good as they originally claimed to be.
—**MICHAEL CRICHTON**, *January 1999*

TRANSCENDENCE

I see myself as a being who is being and being more and more.
—**ALLEN GINSBERG**, *April 1969*



THE USA

We've never paid for the crimes of the past; now we're trying to bury them. That's one reason the technological society advances at such a great rate: It frees people from having to look back into the horrors of the past. Western man has never faced up to the slave trade, the concentration camps, the colonization of the world, the imperialization of the world—the list could go on as long as one's knowledge of history.
—**NORMAN MAILER**, *January 1968*

I do not admire "the people," as such. No one really does. Their folk wisdom is usually false, their instincts predatory. Even their sense of survival—so highly developed in the individual—goes berserk in the mass. A crowd is a fool.
—**GORE VIDAL**, *June 1969*

The folks who settled the United States and migrated to it afterward have mostly been narrow-minded religious people, exploiters, and frontier-justice types who shot first and asked questions later. We're not a freedom-loving people in the beautiful, spiritual sense. We have an inspiring Constitution, but we're a hard-hearted people.
—**GEORGE CARLIN**, *January 1982*

WAR

If you get a boom in American virtue, like you did in World War II, when the citizen-soldiers of this country flat-out saved the world from Nazism, it is inevitable that you are going to have a military-industrial complex and wind up fighting a whole bunch of wars because you want to find a place to be virtuous again. Vietnam was the inevitable outcome of D-Day.
—**DAVID MAMET**, *April 1995*

WEED

Grass probably helped me as much as it hurt me. Especially as a performer. When you're high, it's easy to kid yourself about how clever certain mediocre pieces of material are. But, on the other hand, pot opens windows and doors that you may not be able to get through any other way. Being a very bound-up, Irish Catholic, tight-assholed person, I've often thought that whatever negative effects pot had on me, it probably saved me from being an alcoholic and a complete fucking brainless idiot by the time I was 25. So I'd say pot has been a break-even proposition for me.
—**GEORGE CARLIN**, *January 1982*

WOMEN

In the past few years, however, I have begun to realize that women are essentially the same as men, that they both have the same problems. I don't think of there being women's problems or women's stories any more than I do of there being men's problems or men's stories. They are all human problems.
—**INGMAR BERGMAN**, *June 1964*

American women seem to have to prove themselves. They wear sex on the surface of their beings like a patina. But the natural ones feel it, as a part of their very being. Sophia Loren is an example. She is living it. She is all woman. Most of your American sex symbols of the cinema, on the other hand, are just wearing it. It's all on the outside. They feel nothing, really—so neither do you.
—**HENRY MILLER**, *September 1964*

The only thing women won't forgive is being betrayed. If, from the beginning, one sets the rules of the game, no matter what they are, women generally accept them. But what they can't stand is if the rules are broken somewhere along the way. If that happens, they can be absolutely unmerciful. Tenderness is inherent not to women but to men. Women know that life is very hard.
—**GABRIEL GARCÍA MÁRQUEZ**, *February 1983*

Italian women are very strong. Don't believe that nonsense that the man runs the house. No way. It's the matriarch... But the men chop up the bodies.
—**MARTIN SCORSESE**, *April 1991*

YOUTH

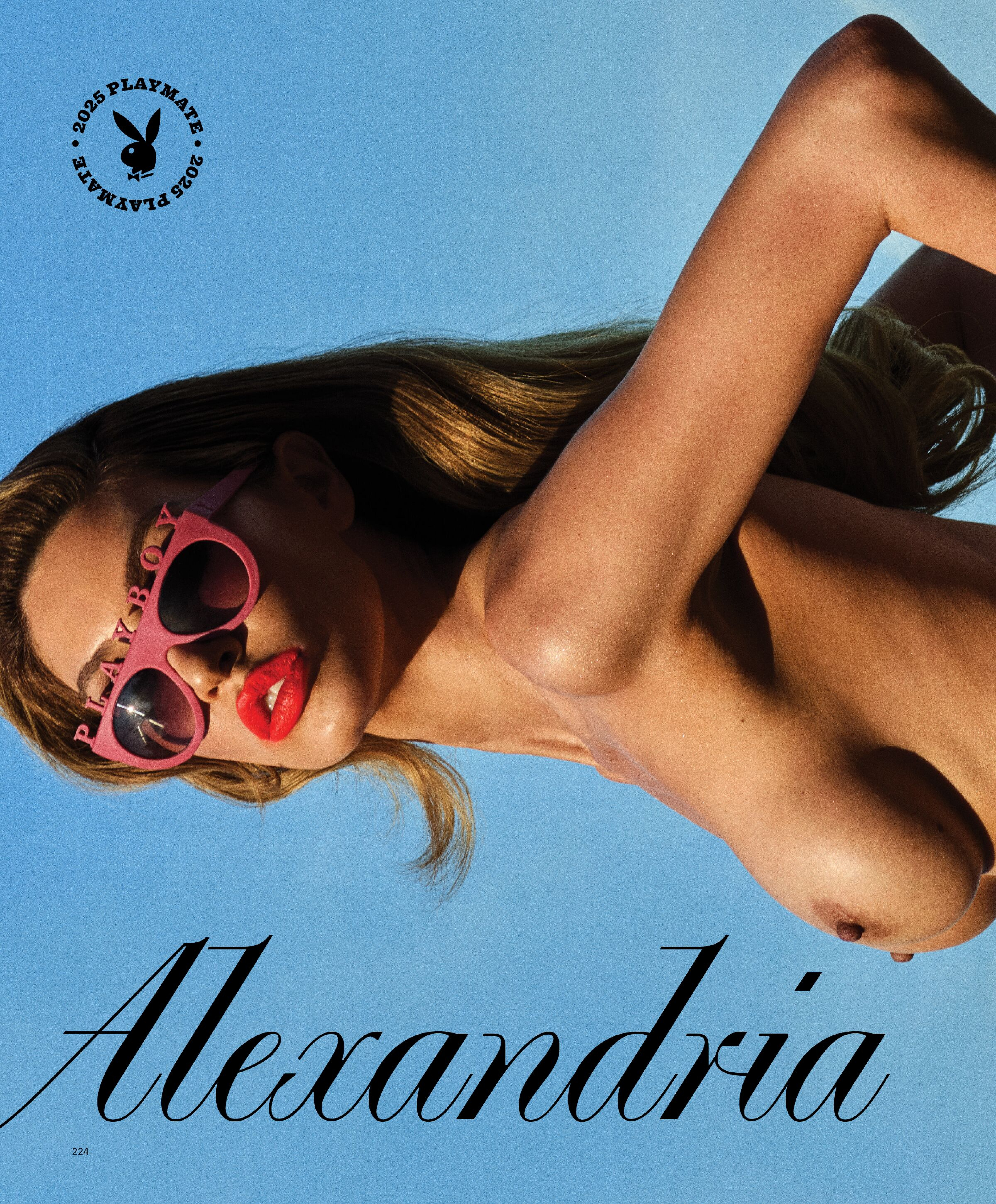
You live on barbed wire and bug juice until you're 28, and there's no price to pay. After a certain point, you pay for everything.... Thirty-five, it's probably the last time you can consider abandoning what you've started and getting into something totally new.
—**JACK NICHOLSON**, *January 2004*

ZEN

I move with the time. Whatever's happening in time, I'm in.
—**SNOOP DOGG**, *October 1995*

“*Whatever's* HAPPENING *in* TIME, *I'm* IN.”

SNOOP DOGG
On zen / October 1995


2025 PLAYMATE • 2025 PLAYMATE •
PLAYBOY

Alexandria

MISS NOVEMBER **ALEXANDRIA FINLEY** TRACKS HER LIFE IN BOOKS, AND TOMORROW IS A NEW PAGE.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY **JAMIE NELSON**

Alexandria's favorite room in her Las Vegas home tells her life story in literal chapters. The 37-year-old transformed one corner of this personal sanctuary into a library that's lined with beloved books, collected from every place she's traveled.

"Inside each first page, I write the state or country where I found it," she says. She prefers her literary passport stamps to be early editions, leather bound whenever feasible. Sometimes, paperbacks are acceptable—as is the case with her copy of Dante's *Inferno*—but she's also prone to taking paperbacks and having them rebound.

Gazing at the shelves, she's instantly transported back to the places from which the tomes were procured. And Alexandria loves when those memories come flooding back. "When I travel and see something new for the first time, I feel so satisfied and fulfilled," she explains. A recent trip to Croatia left her mesmerized by Dubrovnik's turquoise waters and ancient castles. Having traveled across Europe for work, she's setting her sights on Latin America and Tokyo next.

Perhaps the ability to explore the world means so much to Alexandria because she understands none of this was guaranteed. In 2019, she conquered stage 3 cervical cancer, enduring chemotherapy and radiation. Just as she recovered enough to return to work, a severe car accident broke her back, leaving her with permanent metal implants and chronic discomfort. "I grappled with why that happened to me, but it gives me a fantastic perspective on life," she says. "I've slowed down a lot and find myself so grateful for little things—that my parents are still alive, that I can walk."

The Long Beach, California, native, who moved to Vegas at 7 when her father relocated for work, confesses to a lifelong struggle with visibility. Growing up in a family that worried about others' judgments instilled a fear of being seen that persists despite her modeling career. "If I'm not working, I shy away from the camera," she says. "To be photographed, I have to adopt a persona, a confidence that I harness for a specific job," she says. "I can get over this fear in the moment, but it lingers for me personally." She prefers the company of her husband, a handful of close friends, and her two huskies and hairless sphynx cat, Pants, to nights out on the Strip.

Her introspective nature drives a constant quest for self-understanding. "I seem to be a person who is constantly looking inward," she says. "I intellectualize my feelings instead of feeling them."

She devours psychology books, seeking to understand how people become who they are, including herself. "It's strange how women are valued for youth and beauty, but we all become more comfortable as we age and our youth fades," she says. "That's a beautiful thing, to be comfortable with yourself. Now I want to celebrate what makes me different and what I've experienced." —**SEAN EVANS**

What's the most intimate thing someone could do for you that doesn't involve touching?

I think the most intimate thing someone can do for you is make you feel safe and heard.

What's the wildest place you've ever changed clothes?

I think the wildest place I've ever changed my clothes is just literally on the side of the street, on the side of the road. When you model, you have to do a quick change real fast.

Whom do you become after midnight?

After midnight, I turn into a pumpkin because I'm an early riser and I like to go to bed early.

What's a scent that turns you on instantly?

I think a scent that turns me on instantly is a good home-cooked meal. There's nothing better than the scent of delicious food.

Have you ever flirted your way out of something? What was it?

I don't think I'm the best flirt. Honestly, if I like someone, they're never going to know. I avoid them.

What part of your personality is your biggest turn on?

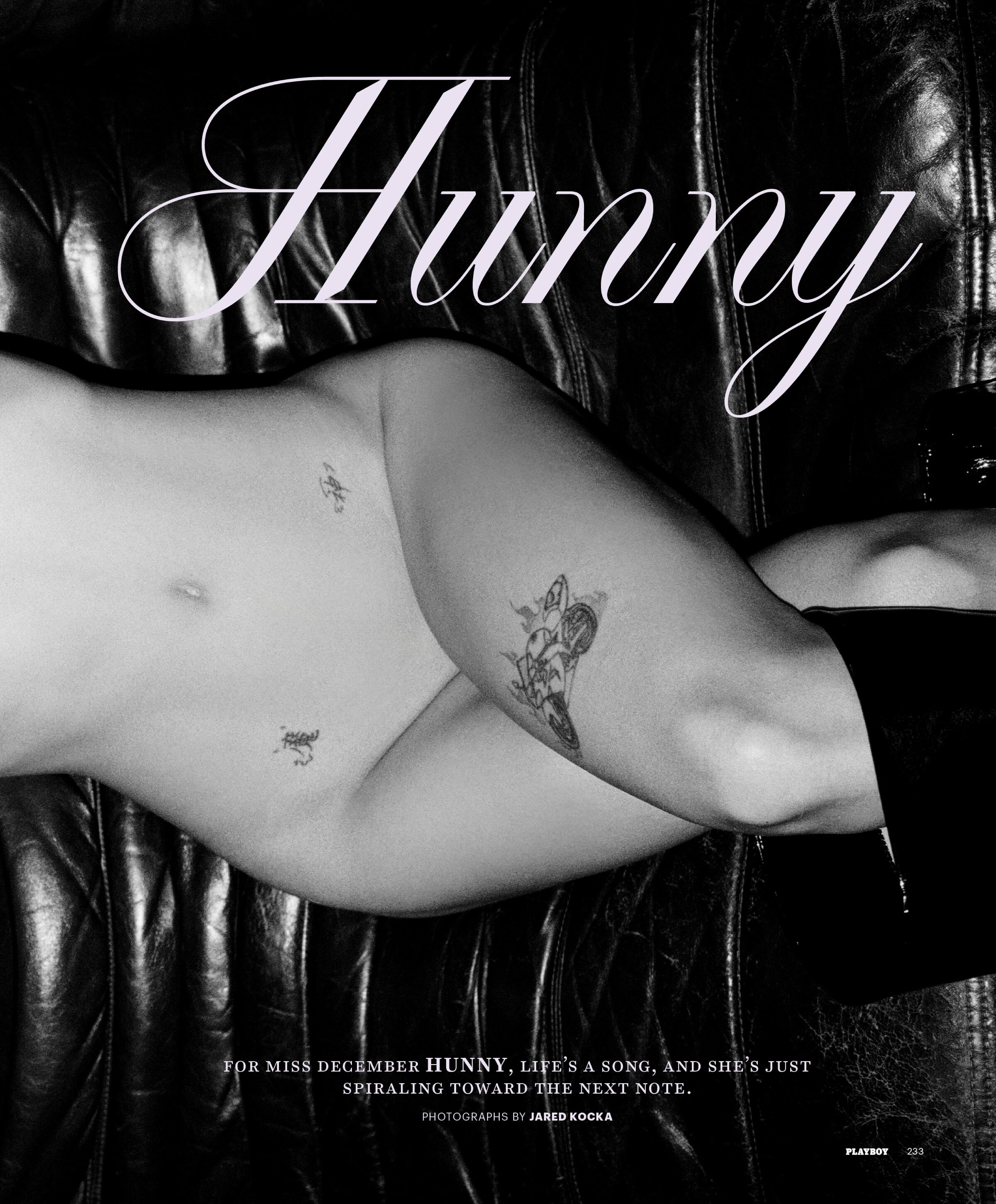
I think the biggest turn-on in my personality is that I am extremely creative. I love to paint. I love to draw. I love to do makeup and art—all sorts of things. My mind's always going.

If you could text your younger self one sentence, what would it say?

If I could text the younger version of myself, I think I would tell myself, "Don't worry, you'll grow into things. Don't worry that you're feeling different than everyone else. It's actually what makes you very unique and special."

STYLING BY **EMILY EVANS**. MAKEUP BY **ALEXANDRA FRENCH**. HAIR BY **OSKAR PERA**. MANICURE BY **GINGER LOPEZ**. LOCATION: **PINK 1968**.

2025 PLAYMATE
2025 PLAYMATE



Hunny

FOR MISS DECEMBER **HUNNY**, LIFE'S A SONG, AND SHE'S JUST SPIRALING TOWARD THE NEXT NOTE.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY **JARED KOCKA**

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“Background jazz music makes any moment better,” Hunny says. “I’ve been really into Stan Getz lately; he’s all I’ve been listening to.” Incidentally, the 22-year-old California native navigates life with the soulful, fluid unpredictability of her favorite Getz recordings. Split between Los Angeles and Brooklyn, she’s found rhythm in New York’s relentless energy. “In L.A., I felt like I wasn’t having real human experiences,” she explains. “Here, you talk to the deli guy and there’s authenticity. It stimulates my mind.”

A full-time model since her late teens, Hunny is building skills beyond camera flashes. She’s studying yoga certification, dabbling with acting, and working with herbs and adaptogens. “Everything in Big Pharma can be replaced by herbs,” she says and adds that she’s swapped Advil for natural remedies.

The ink on her body tells a story, though she wouldn’t write most of those chapters the same way today. The bulk of her tattoos happened in her midteens, during a rebellious phase she describes with equal parts regret and acceptance.

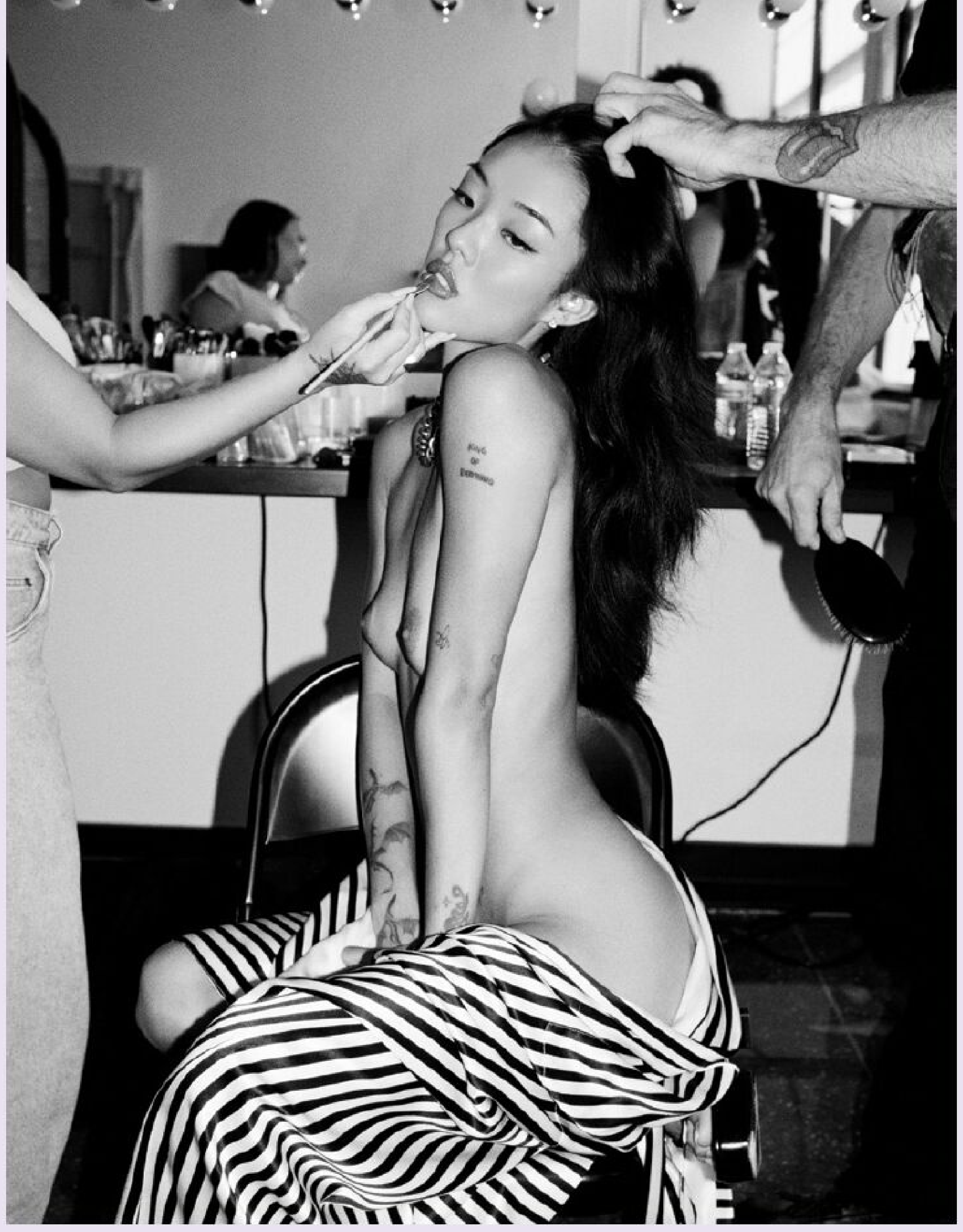
“I admire people who have their whole body covered in ink, but a lot of the visual aesthetic on my body doesn’t align with who I am now,” she says. The exception is a recent spiral hand-poked between her ribs, a symbol of life’s beautiful futility. “We all go in spirals constantly,” she muses. “It’s not necessarily bad. It can be revisiting lessons in your life, but each time you find a new learning.”

That philosophy was forged through dramatic experiences. For example, at 16, she ran away from L.A. to Massachusetts, living for more than a year in an abandoned mansion with her boyfriend and his mother—a famous dominatrix who was renovating the crumbling estate. “I was in a run-down, broken house, and it was metaphorical,” she says of that transformative period. “I felt empty leaving, but that [move] started the process of fixing things up.”

Her peace comes from extremes: the disciplined intensity of Muay Thai boxing balanced against the meditative quiet of ceramics and gardening. She gravitates between intensity and stillness, unable to exist in just one mode. “I can’t have one or the other,” she says, laughing. “I’ll go crazy.”

Hunny has never used dating apps. “I don’t like the idea of marketing yourself as someone who wants or needs to date,” she explains. “I’m more drawn to intense connections that surpass physical attraction.” Her current partner won her over through conversations about spirituality and life’s deeper meanings.

Music anchors Hunny’s restless spirit. From 12 years of opera training to her current Stan Getz obsession, melodies remain constant. A beloved bass guitar hasn’t been strummed in months, sitting silent in her apartment’s corner for now. Another spiral waiting for its moment to return. —SEAN EVANS



What's something you do when you're totally alone?

When I'm totally alone in my room, I'll watch true crime and I will dance ecstatically in my room.

What's the most intimate thing someone could do for you that doesn't involve touching?

The most intimate thing that somebody can do for me that doesn't involve touching is breakfast in bed every day...with Eggos and milk and orange juice and everything else.

If we went through your trash, what would we learn about you?

If you went through my trash, it would be like going to the nearest 7-Eleven.

What are you most passionate about?

Being my most authentic self. With a little bit of spice and a little bit of sugar.

What's the most rebellious thing you've worn or not worn?

I've been fully nude, draped in diamonds, and public.

If your mood right now was a piece of lingerie, what would it be?

If my mood right now was a piece of lingerie, it would be an all-latex bodysuit. Sweaty, hot, and constricting.

What drew you to the *Playboy* world?

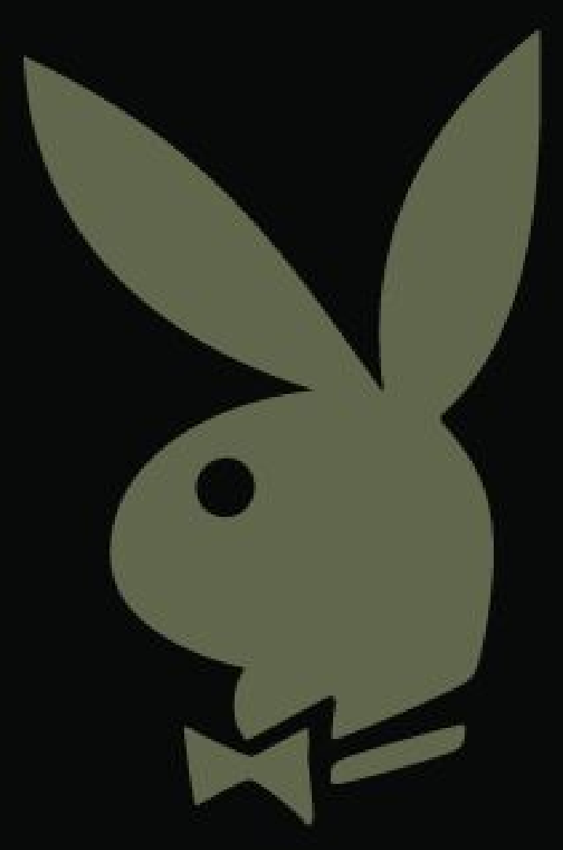
Everything and anything Marilyn Monroe drew me to the *Playboy* world.

What's something you've never told your parents?

I used to be a dominatrix.

If you could text your younger self one sentence, what would it say?

You're gonna be a Playmate.

STYLING BY **CASSIE ANDERSON**. MAKEUP BY **ALEX T.** HAIR BY **CLAY NIELSEN.**